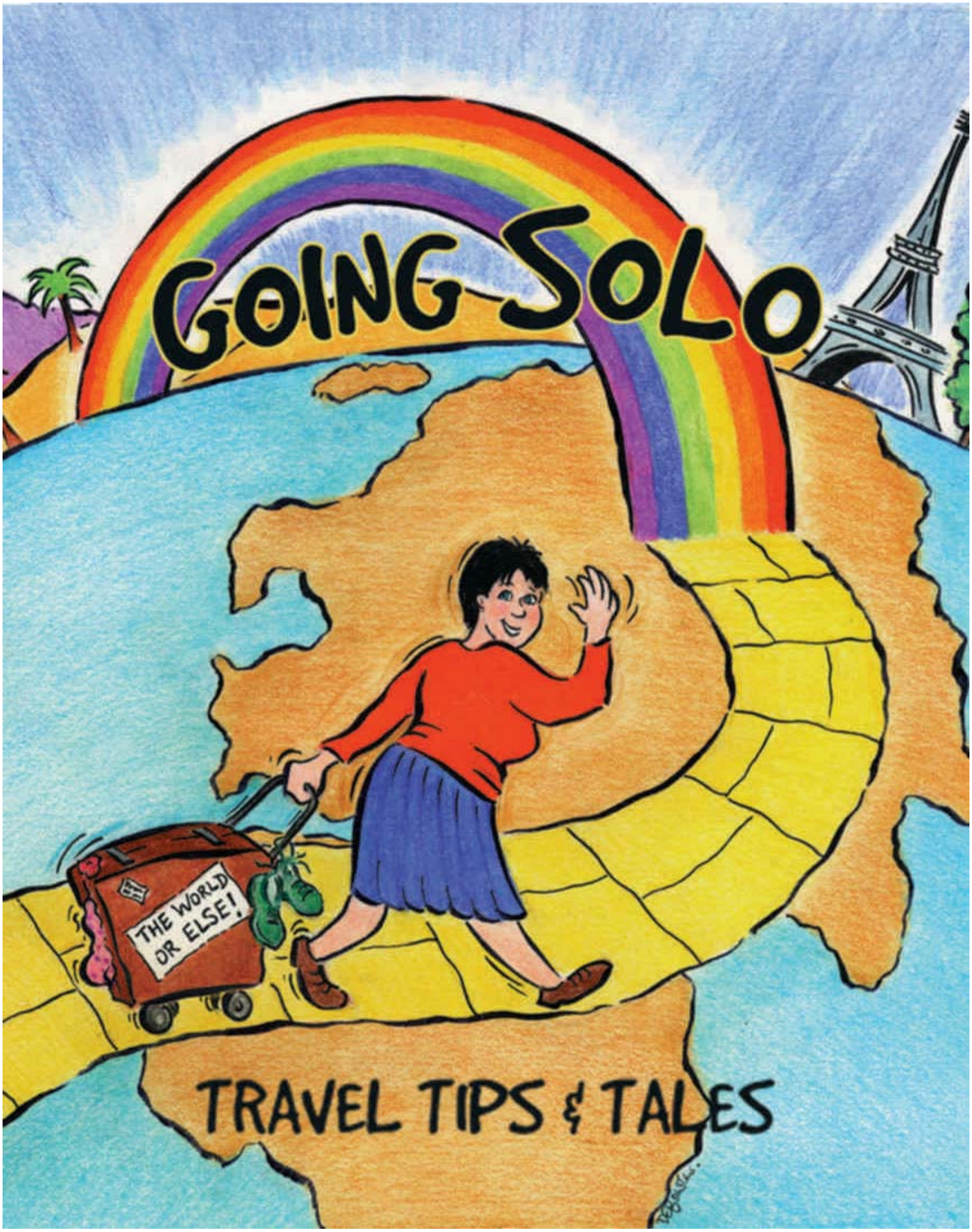
GOING SOLO
THE WORLD OR ELSE!
TRAVEL TIPS & TALES

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Introduction

Catch the Spirit Travel Solo

People want to believe that somewhere,
somehow it is still very dangerous, bizarre,
anxiety-making and exotic to travel,
that one can still make discoveries
in a glorious solitary way.

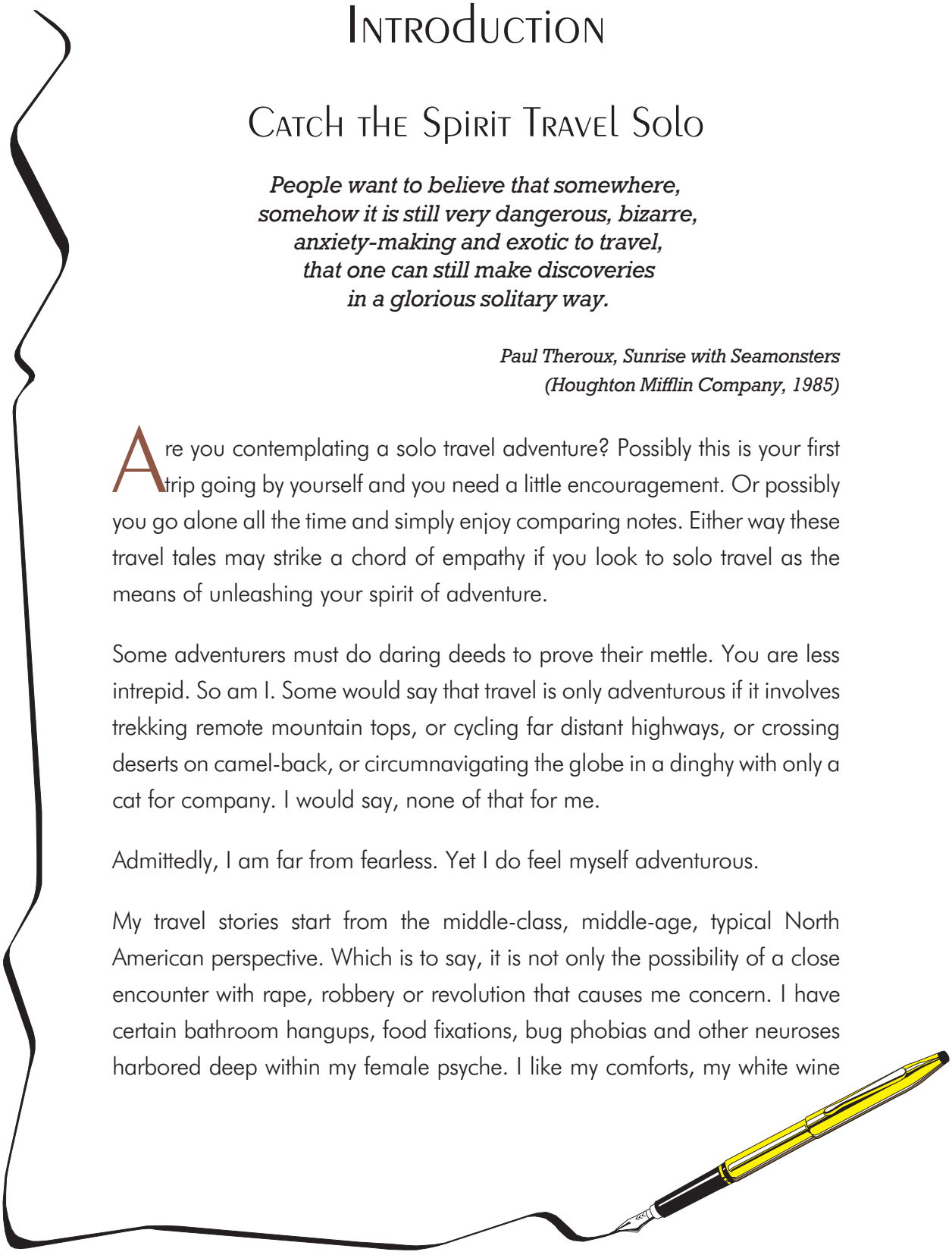
Paul Theroux, Sunrise with Seamonsters
(Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985)

Are you contemplating a solo travel adventure? Possibly this is your first trip going by yourself and you need a little encouragement. Or possibly you go alone all the time and simply enjoy comparing notes. Either way these travel tales may strike a chord of empathy if you look to solo travel as the means of unleashing your spirit of adventure.

Some adventurers must do daring deeds to prove their mettle. You are less intrepid. So am I. Some would say that travel is only adventurous if it involves trekking remote mountain tops, or cycling far distant highways, or crossing deserts on camel-back, or circumnavigating the globe in a dinghy with only a cat for company. I would say, none of that for me.

Admittedly, I am far from fearless. Yet I do feel myself adventurous.

My travel stories start from the middle-class, middle-age, typical North American perspective. Which is to say, it is not only the possibility of a close encounter with rape, robbery or revolution that causes me concern. I have certain bathroom hangups, food fixations, bug phobias and other neuroses harbored deep within my female psyche. I like my comforts, my white wine



chilled, my bath long and lazy, and clean sheets on my bed. I don't like flies, mosquitoes, dirt or strange, unaccountable odors, feeling hot and sweaty, or food with weird ingredients. Bouncing along on dusty buses or playing catch-me-if-you-can with foreign cockroaches is no holiday, if you ask me.

Still, under all these ingrained insecurities I feel I possess a spirit of adventure. And that brings me to 1985. In 1985 I felt I was in a rut and must get out. My routine had become dull and plodding. As always I looked to travel to put the zing back in my step, only this time I wanted more than a quick getaway to some resort. I longed for a life changing experience. Foreign travel, independently and on a budget I believed would push me beyond mental security zones and in touch with my repressed spirit of adventure. I wanted to wander but not without purpose. I promised myself that this trip would be a new beginning to a new career.

Putting into practice the old axiom: write what you know, I decided to become an expert on solo travel and live happily ever after writing about my experiences. To launch my new career I had to sell my car, furniture and stocks, in fact all my meager belongings, to finance a year-long, around-the-world journey. I figured if nothing else came of my dream, at least I would have my life-changing experience because restricted finances would demand a thrifty lifestyle, and dispensing with feminine fears and inhibitions would surely test my limits and capabilities.

Thanks to friends who stored my letters from abroad until my return, I had an accumulated daily journal amounting to several hundred thousand words from which to compose my travel tales. If you haven't guessed already, these tales won't tell you where to stay or eat, or much about local attractions. They are mostly about sticky predicaments and minor misadventures I got myself into (and out of) from planning stage to journey's end. In common with many travel tales they include dusty buses and cockroaches, a little romance on the road, a little insight into the nature of things, and an assortment of odd characters who helped me rekindle my sense adventure. Any traveler may encounter similar experiences, but because our world contains enough variance for all its creatures, my travel tales are uniquely my own, as your tales will be uniquely yours. Guaranteed.

Diane Redfern

See Going Solo Tips

Getting Started Independently

Budget, Deals, Health, Insurance, Money, Travel Agent

Tipping Around the World

Packing

Year's Gear in One Bag

Picture yourself on the eve of your first big solitary adventure, alone in your bedroom facing one small, brown suitcase fitted with wheels and a leash, small enough to fit under an aircraft seat.

That was me in September 1985, graduate of the school of matrimony from which, besides the arts of motherhood, I had learned to avoid changing flat tires and toting bags if a man were around to do it. About packing light I had learned nothing at all.

On my first solo trip to Italy a year earlier, traveling light meant cramming half my wardrobe into one large-size suitcase, a tote bag and a hand bag. Back then I smugly presumed the lot could easily be handled by one of those fold-up metal trolleys on wheels, which were state-of-the-art in those days. The baggage was strapped on with a bungee cord, and off you went pulling the cart and bags behind you. No problem.

I hadn't reckoned on having to haul a cart-full of teetering luggage up the fourscore and ten steps I encountered at Milan train station. But climbing ninety steps was nothing compared to hefting the whole kit and caboodle onto and off of water-buses in Venice. That was a travel treat I reserved for my 45th year of life, at the end of a 20-hour journey by plane, train and interconnecting bus. Which brings me to Venetian canals.

As you may know, picturesquely arching over each and every Venetian canal is a quaint footbridge with decorative railings and seven or eight steps up one side and down the other. But "picturesque" and "quaint" quickly acquire new

and much less pleasant meanings once you drag a luggage trolley across eight of those bridges between the water-bus stop and your hotel.

Having tried several unpacking and rearranging techniques on the previous three bridges, I faced bridge number four with grim determination and began a gingerly bumping ascent, counting as I went . . . one, bump . . . two, bump . . . three. It was at step six on the up side when the whole damn contraption fell to pieces, slithering raucously to the bottom step. Bags, bits of metal tubing and wheels skittered in all directions. The bungee cord, as if propelled from a sling shot, went zinging through the air to land at the feet of a quite astonished Italian. Thank heavens he wasn't killed.

Make It Light Please

Italy taught me rule number one. If you travel alone, take no more than you can comfortably carry with your own two arms, or on your back. I knew that my less than perfect body would need some coaxing to carry me through 18 countries and a year on the road. There simply wouldn't be the room or the strength for most of the paraphernalia usually considered essential to North American style femininity. I had only to persuade myself that I did not require cosmetics, hair-dryer, iron, high-heeled dancing shoes, umbrella, jewelry or, of all things to leave behind – a camera. It took plenty of self-imposed brainwashing (*Diane darling. Forget that curling iron; you are gorgeous even with straight hair*), but I finally managed to get 65 necessities packed into that one brown bag, a feat I still rank high among my lifelong list of accomplishments.

Shoes are my worst weakness. I could easily have filled my suitcase with shoes for every occasion, except for hiking boots. I had no trouble ruling them out because mountaineering and camping were not on my agenda. I agonized over which two pairs (one pair on my feet and one pair in the bag) would go with me before settling on light-weight, low-heeled shoes, okay for walking yet also appropriate for wearing to a restaurant or evening concert.

All went well with this plan until, some months into my journey, I reached Ayers Rock, that awe-inspiring monolith located in the center of the Australian outback. If you visit Ayers Rock and do not climb it, you cannot write your name in the book placed at the top and cannot rightly claim you have done Ayers Rock. Also, while the more intrepid members of your day-tour group scale the heights, you must wait for them, in disgrace, at the

Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park

Formerly known as "Ayer's Rock," Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is one of Australia's most famous landmarks. Some years ago, Australia's aboriginal people won back ownership of the site, which they hold sacred.

Tourists are now asked to refrain from walking on the rock, although this has not yet brought a halt to the practice.

Authorities are reported to be working on a code of conduct for visitors to this and other aboriginal sites around the country.

base of the rock, attended by swarms of Australian flies, which are noted in travel circles as the peskiest flies on earth. They love to fasten to your tear ducts. Wincing only invites them to scurry across your eyelids. Flicking, blowing, or slapping stirs them into short circular flight only to alight an instant later. Soon they have you dancing and flapping like a madman. I know this first-hand because, in my leather-soled flats, I managed only a few slip-sliding meters up the sheer rock face before retreating to the bottom. Actually, it's quite a comical sight, but only if someone else is the target. I was nearly foaming at the mouth by the time the other dauntless day-trippers climbed back down the rock flushed with achievement.

As they say, the best laid plans go astray, but most of the time my packing plan worked without a hitch. Hitching is never in my plans, as in hitchhiking, that is. Unthinkable. Yet six months down the road, in Zimbabwe, I met Peter (so will you, later on) at Victoria Falls and suddenly there seemed nothing I'd rather do than go with him hitchhiking and camping-out in Botswana's Okavango Delta wildlife reserve.

Carrying a backpack would have suited the occasion better than pulling a little brown suitcase on wheels down the highway. But Peter was patient, and the local folk were amused. Quite a few had fun making jokes about the woman walking a very funny looking dog. I didn't mind; Pooch (as I fondly nicknamed the bag) doubled as conversational icebreaker. Lingering in my mind's eye still, those laughing faces bring a smile to my face even now as I write and the memories come flooding back.

I covered a lot of territory with Pooch as my constant companion. More than just a survival kit, Pooch became a significant symbol of the fulfillment of my travel dream, and I actually suffered guilty pangs when I recently replaced the bag with a new improved version. The new one has a retractable handle instead of a leash, and its shape is more rectangular, a design that no longer summons up doggy images. It should be easier to manage and more functional. But I know it won't be more fun.

After all, you know what they say about walking the dog – it's a great way to meet people.

See Going Solo Tips

Packing Tips

Lost

Follow Your Nose

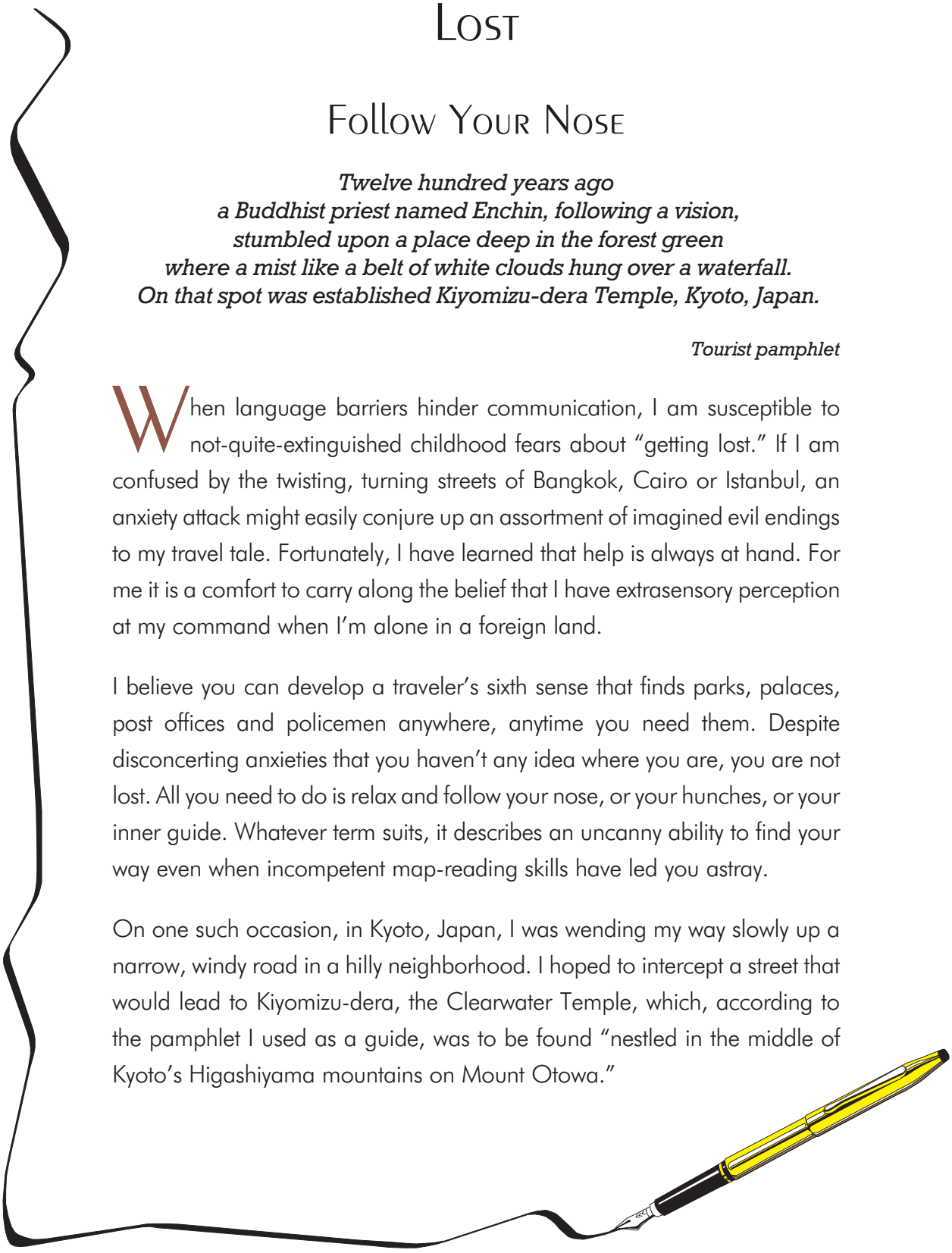
Twelve hundred years ago
a Buddhist priest named Enchin, following a vision,
stumbled upon a place deep in the forest green
where a mist like a belt of white clouds hung over a waterfall.
On that spot was established Kiyomizu-dera Temple, Kyoto, Japan.

Tourist pamphlet

When language barriers hinder communication, I am susceptible to not-quite-extinguished childhood fears about "getting lost." If I am confused by the twisting, turning streets of Bangkok, Cairo or Istanbul, an anxiety attack might easily conjure up an assortment of imagined evil endings to my travel tale. Fortunately, I have learned that help is always at hand. For me it is a comfort to carry along the belief that I have extrasensory perception at my command when I'm alone in a foreign land.

I believe you can develop a traveler's sixth sense that finds parks, palaces, post offices and policemen anywhere, anytime you need them. Despite disconcerting anxieties that you haven't any idea where you are, you are not lost. All you need to do is relax and follow your nose, or your hunches, or your inner guide. Whatever term suits, it describes an uncanny ability to find your way even when incompetent map-reading skills have led you astray.

On one such occasion, in Kyoto, Japan, I was wending my way slowly up a narrow, windy road in a hilly neighborhood. I hoped to intercept a street that would lead to Kiyomizu-dera, the Clearwater Temple, which, according to the pamphlet I used as a guide, was to be found "nestled in the middle of Kyoto's Higashiyama mountains on Mount Otowa."



NEARLY THERE!
REST IN PEACE
DEB 97

The city lay below in a hill-rimmed bowl under a cloudless blue dome, and a warm September sun blazed toward high noon. Along the way, children and small dogs played in crooked alleys and tiny Japanese gardens.

Then appeared a fork in the road. Rusty English lettering on a battered tin sign might have said "To Kyomizu..."; I couldn't be sure. It pointed to a weedy path trailing downward into a wooded gully.

Down the hillside, away from houses and chattering children, I followed the path, charmed for a time by the sudden transition from city clamor to country silence. It led to a meandering stream, crossed a rough wooden bridge, then shortly after reached an underpass tunnel that ran darkly and, in my mind, ominously beneath a multi-laned highway.

Common sense told me to pause and reflect. According to the directions, "the approach to Kyomizu-dera is an attractive winding road lined with colorful souvenir shops." Maybe, I thought, that scenario awaits somewhere on the other side of the tunnel.

On the other hand, a nasty urine smell exuded from this side, summoning forth creepy fears based in female vulnerability. Surely, said common sense, this is no place for a woman alone. I turned tail and went back up the path into the street I had recently left.

Up the road some, I noticed two women having a mid-morning gossip while their children played. I approached them smiling and pointing at my map. In heavily enunciated and, probably, overly loud English, I asked for directions to Kiyomizu-dera.

Neither woman spoke English, but somehow my intent was clear. They nodded, smiled, gestured and gave me to understand I should follow one twinkle-eyed, cherub-faced child of about eight or nine.

I smiled, nodded and vigorously gestured my thanks.

The tyke led me to a place where he stood smiling, nodding, gesturing and pointing. As we were at the exact same path from which I had just emerged, my thank-you's were less enthusiastic. But, in view of such cheerful encouragement, and not wanting to cause offense, I found no other choice than to head down the trail again.

Back at the offensive tunnel, I hesitated once more. But now common sense argued that after all, it *was* broad daylight and what's a little stink when you have one of Japan's most revered attractions waiting at the other end? So, holding nose and breath, I plunged in and hurried along, all the time half expecting some horrid, nameless thing to lunge from the shadows.

But nothing at all appeared, except the other side and with it, not an attractive road lined with colorful shops, but a long concrete stairway leading up and up and up the brush-covered mountainside before disappearing into a tangle of scrubby shrubs and spindly trees.

Fairly near to gasping, I eventually reached the top step, which culminated on a barely discernable path that in turn ended in a badly neglected cemetery. A cemetery! And still no sign of Kiyomizu-dera. With the only alternative being to go back down and face that tunnel again, I decided to press on through the weed and rubble-ridden graveyard despite biting gnats and killing midday heat. Over cracked and tumble-down gravestones I bumbled on wondering if, like Alice, I'd wandered through the looking glass into some bizarre, imaginary world.

Minutes later however, I found and followed a proper stoned walkway. The landscape turned fresher with evergreen trees lining either side. But when I finally came face to front with a small, unimposing and totally deserted shrine, I was already three hours into this misadventure. I was hot, tired, and not impressed, even if confidence in my innate tracking ability had been restored. "So this is Kiyomizu-dera," I grumbled aloud. "Not much of a show and a lot of trouble to see it."

Solo sightseeing was a bust. Fed up, I figured it was time I got out the same way I got in, but first I sat down on a stone to rest while working up the courage to retrace my steps back through the cemetery, down the mountainside, and through that crummy tunnel yet again.

Then out of the silence drifted a muffled sound. It drew me to the forest and the edge of a steep ravine where a stupefying sight stopped me in my tracks. On the opposite hillside, about 200 meters distant, through a sun-dappled veil of tall pine trees, I saw a wide, gabled veranda overlooking a cascading waterfall. Fantastic pagoda shapes jutted everywhere between the tree tops.

Magnificent beyond imagination, Kiyomizu-dera Temple appeared, hazily at first, like a gigantic, exquisite, silkscreen painting coming to life before my eyes. Now I could see hundreds of people milling on the verandah's edge and along numerous pathways winding to and fro.

The temple grounds materialized gradually into my senses as if in a vision. The effect was enchanting. Lofty thoughts flew in my head while the scene held me transfixed. I felt as if some mysterious force had compelled me to come the way I had just as Enchin the monk had been compelled to come to this spot some 1,200 years earlier. Elated by the experience, I resumed the trail with revived energy and was practically skipping along when I emerged from the forest into what looked to be the temple keepers' compound.

Evidently I had found Kiyomizu-dera via the back door.

Perplexed gardeners stopped their tasks to give me curious stares as I bounced by. Possibly they wondered at the lengths some people go to avoid paying an admission fee. I smiled, nodded and bowed in passing and went on to roam the temple grounds and gardens.

Two or three hours later, feeling mellowed and relaxed, I departed Kiyomizu-dera by the front entrance. Stopping at the ticket booth, I gathered more curious stares while trying to explain why I was paying the admission fee on my way out.

Attitude

Where There's a Will There's A Way

A year on the road gave me much more time to spend than dollars, so I resigned myself to the fact that first-class hotels would have to be replaced by bed and breakfast homestays, YM and YWCA lodgings, and maybe even the occasional hostel dormitory.

So much for strong-willed intentions so far. First in Tokyo, again in Hong Kong, then again in Bangkok I had let vague misgivings and fears get the better of me. Faced with foreign sights and sounds, I fled from the airport directly to refuge in upscale North American style hotels of the Hilton, Hyatt and Sheraton variety.

You'll be homeward bound within a month at this rate, my sober side chided.

I'll do better in Chiang Mai I promised myself.

Noted for picturesque scenery and as a starting-place for backpacking trips to various indigenous hill tribe villages, Chiang Mai also had plenty of decent guest houses available for under $10 a day, I had heard. Determined to keep a tight rein on the lodging budget, I stepped off the train and quickly found several guest house and hotel touts congregated on the platform. Within moments, even with my best intentions at work, I had arranged to stay in a mid-range hotel. Better but not good enough.

It took a colony of ants to accomplish what strength of character could not. Whenever I came back from some excursion or other and set down my handbag for more than ten minutes, the ants would appear. Through a crack in the floorboard they marched in single file across the room straight for my

handbag, attracted by a a package of candy-coated chewing gum. No matter what deterrent either I or hotel staff might apply, chewing gum had an irresistible allure for these ants. After two days of waging lethal warfare upon them, I gave up the gum and found solace in the idea that if I had to share a room with ants, I might at least stay within budget.

Following a map purchased at a local book store, I found Chiang Mai Guest House, an elderly yet distinguished teakwood building, central, close to attractions and restaurants. Showers and toilets were a short walk down a wide, open-air veranda-like corridor that surrounded the bedroom wing. The price (about $6.50 back then) would certainly help restore solvency to my travel fund.

Pleased with myself, I lazed away the sultry afternoon on the verandah stretched out on an authentic Thai wooden chaise. How pleasant I thought, the perfect place to do nothing more than read the original version of *Anna and the King of Siam*, which I had picked up in a local book shop. More active pastimes, like elephant riding, could wait a day. And I had earlier decided that backpacking to remote hill tribes could wait for another trip. I was content to rest. Breezes off the Ping River fanned my cheek, and sounds of a trickling garden fountain played softly on my ear. The idea of fretting over trivia like private bathrooms suddenly seemed nothing short of ridiculous.

Absorbed in the romantic story of Anna Leonowens, the English governess who lived six years in the Royal Palace at Bangkok, I hardly stirred from that spot the rest of the afternoon, except to go for a bite to eat, then I retired early to my sparse but spotlessly clean room. Just as sleep approached, two vexing thoughts nudged obtrusively into my mind: snakes and bladders.

The thing was, two snakes had already crossed my path in Chiang Mai. I met a snake slithering down, as I was midway up, the 300-step approach to Wat Phra That, an otherwise idyllic temple situated atop Doi Suthep mountain, about 16 km from Chiang Mai. Another time, a little green snake and a foot-long lizard had scurried away as I strolled around the city's moated periphery. Then there was the blood curdling image of a pail full of writhing scorpions waiting to be transformed into gilded jewelry, which had been my displeasure to behold while touring a nearby orchid farm. Oh, and who could forget the huge rhinoceros beetles I encountered on the way to the bank. A group of men, each with a beetle leashed to a stick, were having races or some sort of game in the middle of the street. They had teasingly invited me to come and join their play, but I was unamused.

Certainly I'd been astonished, startled, even horrified by such strange scenes. But I at least had gone on my way unscathed, and that is more than can be said for the unfortunate scorpions and beetles.

Now however, in bed, trying to sleep, I suddenly wondered where the snakes go at night. It occurred to me that open-air verandas would likely make good shelter for weary snakes. That's when I thought

about my pesky bladder and the fact that it normally demands relief once or twice during the night. Then I realized that my shoes, in accordance with Thai custom, were stashed neatly outside, at the bottom of many steps.

Okay, no middle-of-the-night wandering for you, I told myself firmly, and shortly after, I nodded off. As usual, I awoke about 3am with the "urge" upon me. I lay there thinking about snakes and trying to will myself back to sleep. By 4:30, still wide awake and the situation becoming critical, I was ready to chance the corridor.

Creeping squeamishly along on tippy-toed bare feet, warily checking the floors, nooks and crannies, there was nary a snake nor any critter to be seen. Moments later, business attended to, I walked confidently back to my room, opened the door, stepped in and . . . splat!

Something had pelted me on the back of the neck. What, I don't know, no doubt something horrible, disgusting and probably snakelike, so you may imagine my rather loud reaction.

By the time I got the light on, the thing, whatever it was, had gone. Okay, okay, probably just a gecko (cute, tiny lizard), I reasoned. After checking under the sheets and everywhere, I flopped back into bed.

Night jitters gave way to slumber, and I hadn't another thought about snakes until 4:05am the following night when a persistent bladder had me going gingerly along the open-air corridor once more.

So far no snake, no gecko as I approached the bathroom. But just as I stepped under the archway between the bathroom and the corridor . . . whizzz! something zapped right past my ear.

I must have yelled loud enough to wake the dead, but no sign whatever appeared that another living soul had noticed my predicament. I felt I must be in some bizarre, surreal dream.

Whoosh . . . ! Right over my head this time.

As if prodded by Satan's pitchfork, I bolted through the archway back to the corridor, turning back just in time to catch sight of a sizeable blurred object flying by again. What? A bug? A bird? No. It was a bat, the biggest bat I'd ever seen. A big, brown, squirrel-sized Thai bat frantically flying to and fro trying to escape the bathroom, the bathroom I now very urgently needed to get into thanks to the adrenalin jolt I'd just received.

I had a bladder problem and, clearly, the bat had a sonar problem. I was afraid to go in. It was unable to come out. While conversing with a bat is not my idea of communing with nature, not like say cuddling a koala, the sight of the poor creature plummeting into the walls aroused my pity. Circumstances called for some kind of action, but all I could think of were a few encouraging words: "Steady now, you can do it. Relax. Take it easy bat, think before you leap. *Pleeease*, I'm in a hurry here."

Was it my wildlife skills or dumb chance that saved the day? I don't know, but suddenly the critter found the archway to freedom and scrammed. The trauma was over for both of us, and I was greatly relieved in every sense of the word.

On my third and last nightly stroll at Chiang Mai Guest House, I met neither gecko nor snake nor bat. But when I arose in the morning, guess what? Once again, my handbag had been occupied by hundreds of tiny ants, attracted, I suppose, by some residue odor of chicklets.

Maybe you think that this episode weakened my fondness for travel. On the contrary, every unsettling experience increased my appreciation for small adventures, and I became less temperamentally rigid with each passing day.

Wanderlust lured me onward, and I had one last night in Thailand before catching a flight to Singapore. Because of my relaxed attitude, I was ready to bus-it back to Bangkok and to try the Lek Guesthouse as recommended by an Australian woman I chummed with one afternoon.

Although the bus was slightly shabby, it was air-conditioned, and the ten-hour trip transpired pleasantly, traversing a mostly rural landscape. A stewardess on board served up soft drinks and coffee, no charge. A lunch concoction of rice and unknown bits of things served at a roadside depot proved more appetizing than it looked. And about 4pm, the stewardess handed out a boxed snack consisting of a chicken leg, a donut, a cupcake and an orange.

This all-inclusive trip cost me about ten bucks, and I figured the budget crisis was finally under control.

A great thunder and lightning storm welcomed our arrival in Bangkok along with a swarm of gabbling taxi drivers, none of whom spoke English. Like a silly twit, I hadn't thought to get directions to the Lek Guesthouse written out in Thai script. No problem, someone at the information booth would surely be kind enough to look up the address in the telephone book and write it out for me.

To make quite a long story short, communications went badly awry, and I ended up riding around Bangkok with a driver who, instructions or no instructions, had no more idea of finding the Lek Guesthouse than I had. As time, trials and errors accumulated, he sensed my increasing frustration and tried to lighten things up by switching the radio from traditional Thai to American music. Fine, except by then I didn't need Credence Clearwater Revival telling me "*There's a Bad Moon Arising*."

During an hour and a half, he had stopped no less than five times to ask help from various nondescript characters. Each discussion proved fruitless. We were hopelessly lost, and we could not communicate either by tongue or in writing. Growing more desperate by the minute, I took navigation into my own hands the next time we stopped by screaming out the window to the crowd at large: "Anyone speak English?"

Praise be to the guardian angel of naive adventurers, a couple of youths sauntered over to help. However, the Lek Guest House might have been on another planet for all they or any of us knew.

Totally exasperated now, I said, "Please, just ask him how much to take me to a hotel near the airport."

"One hundred fifty baht," the driver replied.

Without argument, I said "Let's go." Half an hour later I was signing the register at the Airport Hotel, nice if you're on an executive's budget. As for my budget, it was at the breaking point once again.

I'll do better in Singapore I promised myself as I slid into a lovely, neck-deep bubble bath.

See Going Solo Tips

Social Issues, Culture Shock

MENU

Relationships

The Mating Game

When I first set out on my grand world tour, I expected my biggest challenge would be finding ways to enjoy spending long, solitary days in strange surroundings. At age 45, I thought I was slightly over-the-hill to attract much notice from the opposite sex. But I quickly became convinced that there must be something about the sight of a solo female, any female, carrying a guidebook and wearing a perplexed, I-wonder-where-I-am expression that sets male hormones astir.

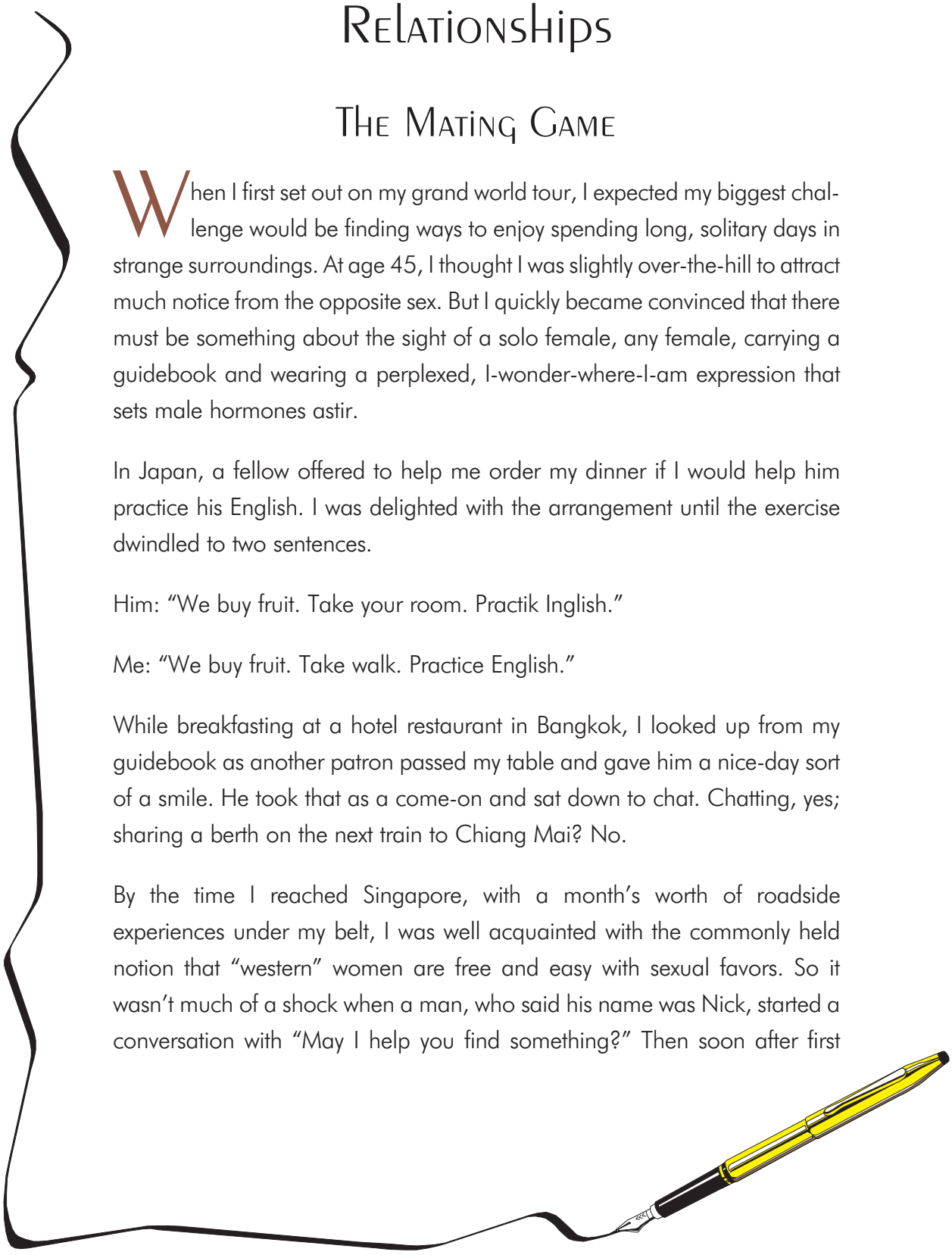
In Japan, a fellow offered to help me order my dinner if I would help him practice his English. I was delighted with the arrangement until the exercise dwindled to two sentences.

Him: "We buy fruit. Take your room. Practik Inglish."

Me: "We buy fruit. Take walk. Practice English."

While breakfasting at a hotel restaurant in Bangkok, I looked up from my guidebook as another patron passed my table and gave him a nice-day sort of a smile. He took that as a come-on and sat down to chat. Chatting, yes; sharing a berth on the next train to Chiang Mai? No.

By the time I reached Singapore, with a month's worth of roadside experiences under my belt, I was well acquainted with the commonly held notion that "western" women are free and easy with sexual favors. So it wasn't much of a shock when a man, who said his name was Nick, started a conversation with "May I help you find something?" Then soon after first



names had been exchanged, he got right to "Are you one of those go-getter kind of women?"

When I returned this remark with a queer look, Nick, an Indonesian businessman, explained himself by saying "I believe in honesty, and to tell you the truth, I like to chase women when I'm away from home."

I am all for honesty. Truthfully, I admit that I am not immune to a serendipitous fling. Certainly I have no wish to be alone all the time, and what could be more romantic than meeting love on the road? If the circumstances and the chemistry agree, I don't mind if I do. But this guy's quick-draw technique struck me as rude and insulting. I mean, really! What did he take me for anyway? Signaling an end to this mating game, I excused myself curtly and escaped into the handiest shop.

Soon after I left Nick on Orchard Street, circumstances seemed to change for the better when I met a man from Bombay.

It happened this way. I was out looking for a supermarket. As I approached a high-rise shopping mall, I noticed a man stepping out of a car in the adjacent parking lot. Fortyish, with dark hair graying at the temples, a nice trim mustache and horn-rimmed glasses gave him a scholarly air that appealed to my tastes. Passing him by with an appreciative thought, I placed my mind back on luncheon snacks and entered the shopping complex.

Hither and yon I went through various corridors, finding no grocery store. Interestingly, however, the man just mentioned crossed my path rather regularly until it became evident that somebody was following someone, though who was following whom remained a little ambiguous. Arriving at an elevator from opposite directions at precisely the same moment, we took the opportunity to ride up together and find out what else was up.

Well, blow me down, the man from Bombay was looking for a supermarket too, and why yes, a cup of tea on the way would just hit the spot.

The old axiom that two heads are better than one proved untrue in this case. Working together, the man from Bombay and I found neither a supermarket nor a suitable tea shop from which to pursue our mutual intentions. After a fruitless 15 minutes, the man from Bombay declared he had better get on to another appointment, but first he offered to pick me up in the evening with his car at the "Y" where I was staying and we'd have dinner together.

In my rule book, car rides with strangers are a definite no-no. Instead, I suggested meeting at the Meridien hotel, which I could get to easily on my own. I explained its location as best I could before we parted ways.

On schedule, I arrived at the Meridien, but after half an hour's wait and no man from Bombay, I assumed something had gone awry and went alone to dine at McDonald's – a shocking confession, I know – but the fact is, I always fall back on home-style junk food when my ego needs nurturing.

A couple of hours later on returning to my room at the YWCA, I found a telephone message. It read: "I waited at the Miramar. Where were you? Will call again."

Sigh! I waited at the Meridien while he was at the Miramar. Sometimes you just can't win.

The following morning I hurried downstairs, with hopes raised, to take a telephone call, expecting, as promised, the man from Bombay.

A male voice on the line sounded vaguely familiar but not as I remembered the voice of the man from Bombay. "Look," he said. "We're both visitors to Singapore. Let's forget this game playing and just enjoy an afternoon together sightseeing."

Surprise! It was Nick, the Indonesian skirt-chaser. Nick! How had he tracked me down? Apparently, during our brief conversation, I had let it slip that I was staying at the "Y".

The man from Bombay? I neither saw nor heard from him again. Oddly, I cannot remember his name, but I do remember Nick. I guess serendipity likes to play games too.

See Going Solo Tips

Safety Tips

Social Issues, Words for Women

PEB 97

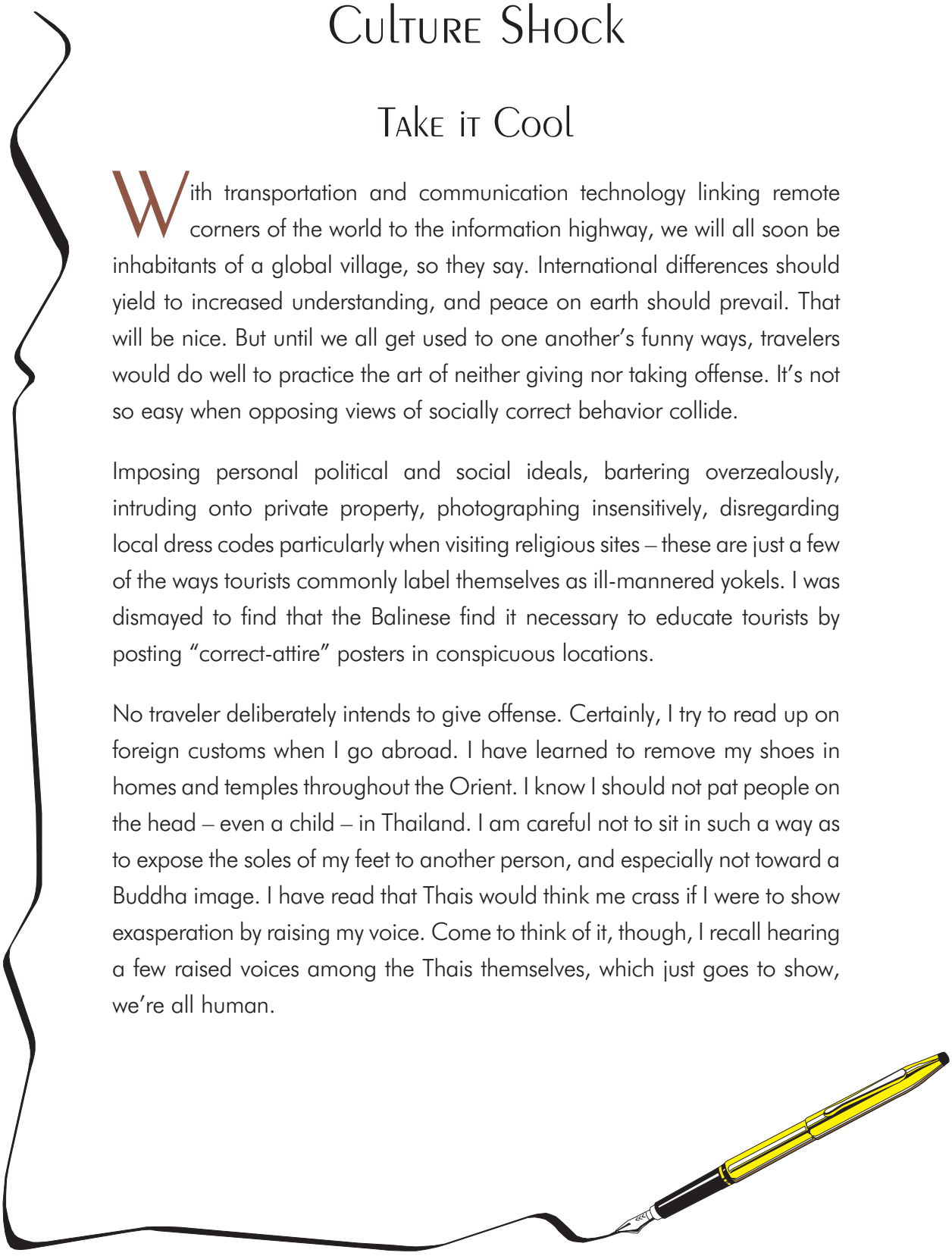
Culture Shock

Take it Cool

With transportation and communication technology linking remote corners of the world to the information highway, we will all soon be inhabitants of a global village, so they say. International differences should yield to increased understanding, and peace on earth should prevail. That will be nice. But until we all get used to one another's funny ways, travelers would do well to practice the art of neither giving nor taking offense. It's not so easy when opposing views of socially correct behavior collide.

Imposing personal political and social ideals, bartering overzealously, intruding onto private property, photographing insensitively, disregarding local dress codes particularly when visiting religious sites – these are just a few of the ways tourists commonly label themselves as ill-mannered yokels. I was dismayed to find that the Balinese find it necessary to educate tourists by posting "correct-attire" posters in conspicuous locations.

No traveler deliberately intends to give offense. Certainly, I try to read up on foreign customs when I go abroad. I have learned to remove my shoes in homes and temples throughout the Orient. I know I should not pat people on the head – even a child – in Thailand. I am careful not to sit in such a way as to expose the soles of my feet to another person, and especially not toward a Buddha image. I have read that Thais would think me crass if I were to show exasperation by raising my voice. Come to think of it, though, I recall hearing a few raised voices among the Thais themselves, which just goes to show, we're all human.



Reading only goes so far. Experience is the best, if the strictest, teacher. Once, in Bangkok, I was aghast to learn the hard way that women must not, even inadvertently, touch a Buddhist monk. During an animated conversation with a young man wearing the signifying saffron-colored robe, my hand unconsciously rested a moment on his sleeve. The monk himself, polite at all costs, never even raised an eyebrow, but the tittering from others in the immediate vicinity let me know I had committed a serious *faux-pas*. I don't know what penance the poor man had to suffer for my blunder, but I endure pangs of regret to this day.

If it is important not to give offense it is equally so not to take offense at habits considered bad manners at home. In Hong Kong and Singapore, I had no trouble obeying "Please Don't Spit" signs. Conversely, I've had to work hard not to turn up my nose and purse my lips in disgust at such public scratching, hacking, snorting and probing as seems acceptable etiquette in various parts of the world.

If individual travelers have little influence in bringing about a better world, they may at least allow the world to effect a change for the better upon themselves. Cultural misunderstandings, I have discovered, are a good exercise in developing tolerance and a sense of humor, which are qualities no solo traveler can do without.

Something in the Way You Wave Attracts Me Like . . .

After four days at Kuta Beach my sense of humor had begun to fray at the edges. I wondered if all of Bali was like this ramshackle version of Hawaii gone to pot. Head north, east, or west, urged my guidebook, and you will find a mythical, magical island where Balinese culture has resisted foreign influences for centuries.

So I squeezed myself into an overloaded bemo, the local form of cheap transportation, and went northeast, to Yeh Sanih, looking for the real Bali. I came to a stop at Bungalows Puri Sanih. Feeling frazzled, hot and squeamish, I detached my sticky self from the clattering contraption and walked tentatively toward the Bali of my imagination.

Shortly, a young man led me down a garden path toward rustic cottages set under swaying palms, flowering hibiscus and fragrant blossoming frangipani trees. The place oozed rustic charm and serenity. On the way, I met an amusing troupe of geese that seemed to have fun patrolling the grounds, bluffing unwary passers-by with threatening hisses and flapping wings. In the near distance I heard frolicking, splashing noises. With every step my taut nerves relaxed as the tranquillity of the place seeped into my being.

Within minutes I unpacked, got into my swimsuit (quite a modest one by modern standards, I hasten to add) and headed for the boisterous sounds. To my utter delight, I found a natural pool fed by fresh spring water effervescently tumbling down the rocky hillside.

A middle-aged European couple lounged on a small patio, and several Balinese youths cavorted in the pool. Everyone sang out friendly greetings as I approached. I breathed deeply of the sweet air, sighed with contentment and plunged into the cool water. There I lolled and floated lazily, thinking that this was certainly the Bali I had imagined and possibly about as close to heaven as I had ever been.

After a while the married couple left, and I was alone with the exuberant teenagers who were only too happy to include me in their splashing and teasing. I, on the other hand, felt much too prim and proper and old and female for such hijinks, so I kept aloof. Most of the boys got the message and let me be, except for one fellow who had learned a few words of English, specifically, "I love you." This singular phrase he sent my way frequently and rather more passionately than I thought fitting for the circumstances. At first I couldn't help giggling girlishly and thinking, how cute, he doesn't know what he's saying. But then I detected a certain disconcerting gleam in his gaze, and it began to dawn that the fellow might have seduction on his mind. And me old enough to be his mother, I thought, indignant, bewildered, and flattered all at once.

Growing discomfort with the situation finally compelled me to retreat to dry ground, which was annoying since I wasn't quite ready to leave the cooling water. "Romeo," however, also removed himself from the pool and perched at the edge next to me, idly sloshing his feet in the water and humming a tune that sounded vaguely Nashville in origin.

Not exactly distressed but no longer as relaxed as I'd hoped to be, I lay on my towel feigning ignorance until a party of four young people – two men and two women – arrived. The women, both perfect models of tanned, blonde, Nordic grace, asked me if I thought the Balinese boys would mind if they were to bathe topless as was their usual practice.

I suppose they figured maturity made me an expert on Balinese custom. Unconcerned about inter-cultural etiquette at that moment and assuming that Balinese boys would be as titillated by the sight of bare breasts as boys anywhere, I seized the chance to relinquish the limelight to these young beauties.

"I'm sure the boys wouldn't mind a bit," I replied, smiling innocently.

Shortly after, I left the jovial group and went to my own verandah to do some writing. Settled in a chair engrossed in reflective thoughts, I forgot the pool side Romeo until jerked from reverie by the sight of him, out of the corner of my eye, sidling up the path to my porch. There he was with the same intense glimmer in his eyes, blowing little kisses, and making pointed gestures toward my bedroom.

There was no mistaking his intention now. Evidently my matronly allure had something over blonde, beautiful and naked.

Concentrating earnestly on my notes, I decided that ignoring his presence was the best defense. And after a time, when I dared to sneak a glance his way, he seemed to have given up and was moving off down the path. At that moment, however, he stopped, turned back and seeing me looking, he waved at me shyly like a child. A wave goodbye, I thought, foolishly returning the gesture. This, of course, was all the incentive he needed to renew his ardent advances.

Enough. I grew exasperated and ended the nonsense by clapping my hands and shooing at him just as you would chase away a nuisance puppy. That sent him off to a lurking distance behind some shrubs where he hung around looking sulky, I don't know how long, because he was lost to my mind as a stream of new visitors began arriving at my verandah.

In my experience the Balinese cannot suffer anyone to be alone; they behave as though it is their bound duty to keep one company. As dusk approached, three new companions were gathered around my chair: a staff member named Made (pronounced Mah-day) who spoke passable English, the village carpenter, and the village masseur.

The masseur was a chubby little man with a round brown face, an impish smile and sparkling black eyes. Plunking down a bag of peanuts for sharing, he made himself comfortable, lotus fashion, at my feet then simultaneously commenced giving me a foot massage and a language lesson in Indonesian. Made acted as interpreter, and the carpenter offered friendly encouragement in the background.

Through Made they plied me with questions: "Where is your husband?" "Where are your children?" "How old are you?" I guessed I was a fascination because I was female and alone.

In the meantime, villagers began assembling on the beach for the evening bathing session, some playing games, others soaping themselves, unabashedly naked, in the rivulets that coursed from the springs to the sea. My companions, Made, the carpenter, and the masseur, decided it was time to go. As he left, the masseur waved at me shyly.

Without a thought I returned his wave then fixed my mind once again on my notes. I hoped to get some details of the day's events recorded before daylight receded into dusk.

Minutes later, coming from a grove of trees over by the beach, I heard a cheerful "yoo-hoo!" Glancing that way, I discerned a chubby figure peeking at me mischievously around the trunk of a palm tree. The next moment the chubby figure called gaily from behind a frangipani tree. Fleetingly appearing like a paunchy Pan, the masseur, clad only in white jockey shorts, flitted from tree to tree, waving merrily and calling "yoo-hoo." Adding comically to the scene, the squawking flock of geese trailed the masseur in a gabbling, flapping entourage.

Clapping a hand over my mouth, I managed to restrain a volley of convulsive mirth before amusement turned quickly to embarrassment as a startling thought entered my mind.

Suddenly I wondered if hand-waving gestures held some significance beyond, "So-long it's been good to know ya." First the fellow at the pool, now the masseur. What to make of this I had no idea. Was I giving out provocative sexual signals? Was I too friendly? Or was I simply overreacting. Maybe, I reasoned, he's just inviting me to go bathing with the other villagers. Confused and near choking with trapped nervous laughter, I withdrew indoors as discreetly as I could, leaving the frisky masseur and his fowl attendants to their own imaginings.

I saw the masseur once more as I was leaving Yeh Sanih. While I waited at the bemo stop, he happened by on his bicycle. We held a conversation composed of a few English and Indonesian words and much gesticulating, from which I gathered that he wanted to meet me down in Kuta one of these days. I hoped he understood that I meant thanks, but no thanks I wasn't interested.

Had either of us any true idea of the other's meaning? I didn't know then, and I don't know now. I suspect the other participants in this travel scenario may have been as perplexed about my behavior as I was by theirs. The global village may soon be a reality, but dwelling there will take a little more effort than simply getting there.

***Note**: Subsequent reading and research shed no light on the significance of hand-waving behavior in Bali. The experts do say, however, that the Balinese have a lighthearted attitude to physical matters, and besides that, they are fun-loving folk who like a good ribald joke.*

See Going Solo Tips

Social Issues, Words for Women

DEB 98.

Trouble

Look for the Silver Lining

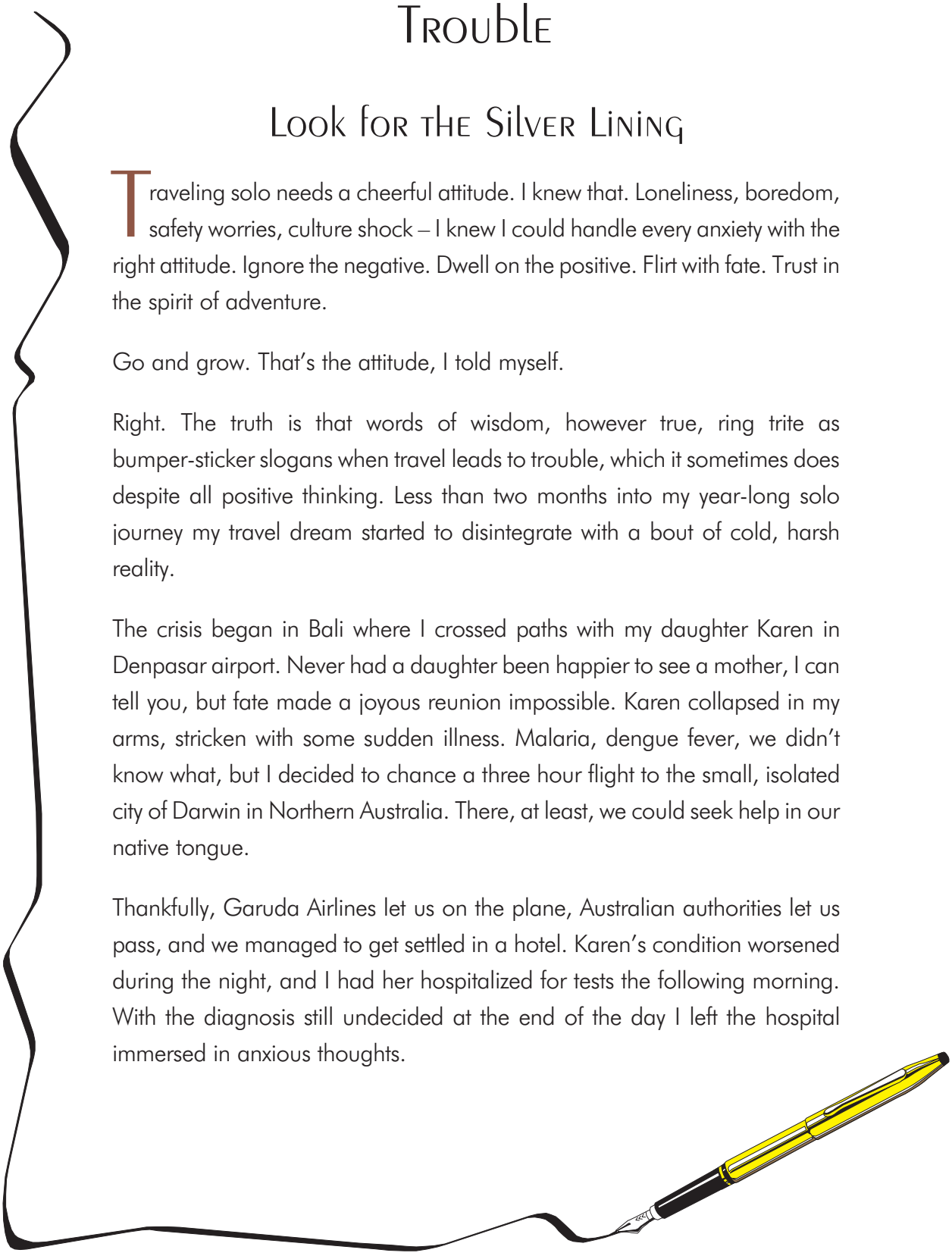
Traveling solo needs a cheerful attitude. I knew that. Loneliness, boredom, safety worries, culture shock – I knew I could handle every anxiety with the right attitude. Ignore the negative. Dwell on the positive. Flirt with fate. Trust in the spirit of adventure.

Go and grow. That's the attitude, I told myself.

Right. The truth is that words of wisdom, however true, ring trite as bumper-sticker slogans when travel leads to trouble, which it sometimes does despite all positive thinking. Less than two months into my year-long solo journey my travel dream started to disintegrate with a bout of cold, harsh reality.

The crisis began in Bali where I crossed paths with my daughter Karen in Denpasar airport. Never had a daughter been happier to see a mother, I can tell you, but fate made a joyous reunion impossible. Karen collapsed in my arms, stricken with some sudden illness. Malaria, dengue fever, we didn't know what, but I decided to chance a three hour flight to the small, isolated city of Darwin in Northern Australia. There, at least, we could seek help in our native tongue.

Thankfully, Garuda Airlines let us on the plane, Australian authorities let us pass, and we managed to get settled in a hotel. Karen's condition worsened during the night, and I had her hospitalized for tests the following morning. With the diagnosis still undecided at the end of the day I left the hospital immersed in anxious thoughts.



I couldn't face returning to a drab, lonely hotel room. Instead, I roamed deserted downtown Darwin. It was about 7pm on a Sunday evening. A clammy, wet-season gloom hung in the twilight. My footsteps and the frenzied buzzing of insects hurling themselves at street lamps were the only sounds disturbing the quiet until two laughing teen-age boys emerged from a restaurant across the street.

Their gaiety intruded cheerfully on my melancholy, giving me a brief lift. They seemed not to notice my existence as they crossed in front of me then stopped to peer in a music shop window. One fellow, I noticed was about fifteen, tall and lanky with longish, fair hair. His buddy was half the height and pudgy, with short, dark, bottle-brush hair. Mutt and Jeff, I mused with a silent chuckle as I walked on by.

In a moment or two I heard the thumping sound of running footsteps and almost simultaneously, a whoosh of air, a tug under my arm then the clattering gait of the boys disappearing down the block into the nearest alley. My wallet! Gone! Driver's license, credit cards and about $60 in cash. In less than ten seconds, I'd been ripped off and left standing in dumb shock, alone on the street surrounded in a sickening, dead silence.

It was my own fault. Walking with the wallet tucked carelessly under my arm made grabbing it as easy as plucking a ripe apple from a low hanging branch. Fortunately I hadn't been totally stupid; my passport, tickets and travelers cheques were secure in the money pouch around my neck, but that was little consolation.

There was no point in following the thieves; they were long gone. Shrouded in self-pity and helpless anger, I turned and walked woodenly back to the hotel, called the police and made a report before heading to my room. All I wanted was to obliterate the day's events in sleep. But as they say, there's no rest for the . . .

The moment I entered the room and switched on the glaring overhead bulb, a flickering movement caught my eye. On the wall, about a foot or so above the pillow upon which I expected to lay my sorry head, a cockroach waggled its antennae in greeting. Now I have faced cockroaches before in my travels without undue hysteria, but this Australian sucker was so big you could see the wicked grin on its face. Three inches at least, five with antennae. I kid you not! It's amazing how dignity maintains you through real problems yet abandons you over something absurd.

"Disgusting, horrid, thing!" I shrieked. "A sick daughter! Mugged! Now this! Why me?"

Twitching antennae dared me to come near that pillow.

I stood at the foot of the bed contemplating my options. Throw my shoe; no, lousy aim. Clobber it with my shoe; no it'll squish – shudder – all over the place. Worse, I'll botch the job, and it'll run right up my arm. Maybe, the old glass and paper trick: place glass over bug, slide a sheet of paper carefully between wall, glass and bug, then quick, run and flush it down the toilet.

Just as I was imagining a five-inch cockroach bouncing off the toilet seat onto and up my leg, the bug caught my drift and went into action mode. Antennae flashing, it raced down the wall to the floor in that zig-zaggy cockroach way, so you can't be sure if it's in retreat or on the attack. You only know it could easily skitter out of sight then reappear without warning somewhere on your person.

That thought was enough to set me in zig-zaggy motion too. With revived energy, I scurried and darted, determined to keep the bug in sight and at a safe distance until I could work out a plan. Before that happened the roach called time out and withdrew under the refrigerator – and I claimed the bed, but not the victory. I wouldn't be able to sleep now would I? Who knew what despicable mischief might be performed upon my body should I nod off. Knowing that cockroaches prefer the dark, I left the overhead light on and lay there staring malevolently at the refrigerator, spitefully aware that the brightness would allow neither the roach nor myself any comfort that night. I concentrated on staring, shoe in hand and primed to kill should the thing dare to appear again.

Suddenly, it was ten hours later. Sleep, blessed sleep had come despite problems both real and imagined. And if any insect danced on my body during all that time, I was blissfully unaware of it.

I awoke to a brand new day, not exactly feeling on top of the world, but at least I was refreshed enough to face come what may with a clear mind. Humor would help, but there wasn't much funny about a sick daughter or getting robbed. Nevertheless, had other passengers looked my way during the bus ride to the hospital, they might have wondered what joke caused a crooked little grin to appear on my face. Had anyone asked, I would have told them I was just thinking about a cockroach.

I wasn't immediately prepared to accept a cockroach as my partner in combating misfortune, but I had to admit our little *pas de deux* must have looked pretty funny. Karen got a laugh out of the story anyway. Later on with time and distance between me and the events of Darwin, I came to realize that the bug had done me a real favor, simply by providing a trivial pursuit to focus on rather than the weightier matters that might well have deprived me of the regenerative sleep I sorely needed. In retrospect it looks to me now that the cockroach had the starring role in this travel tale.

P.S. Karen recovered from a kidney infection after a three-day, $1,000 hospital bill paid cash-on-the-spot. The two of us spent several more days in Darwin restoring our spirits and

reassembling our resources. Soon we were both back on the road resuming our singular journeys, a little bruised, a little wiser but once again eagerly anticipating the rosier side of travel.

See Going Solo Tips

Money Tips

Safety Tips

Loneliness

Alone Never Lonely

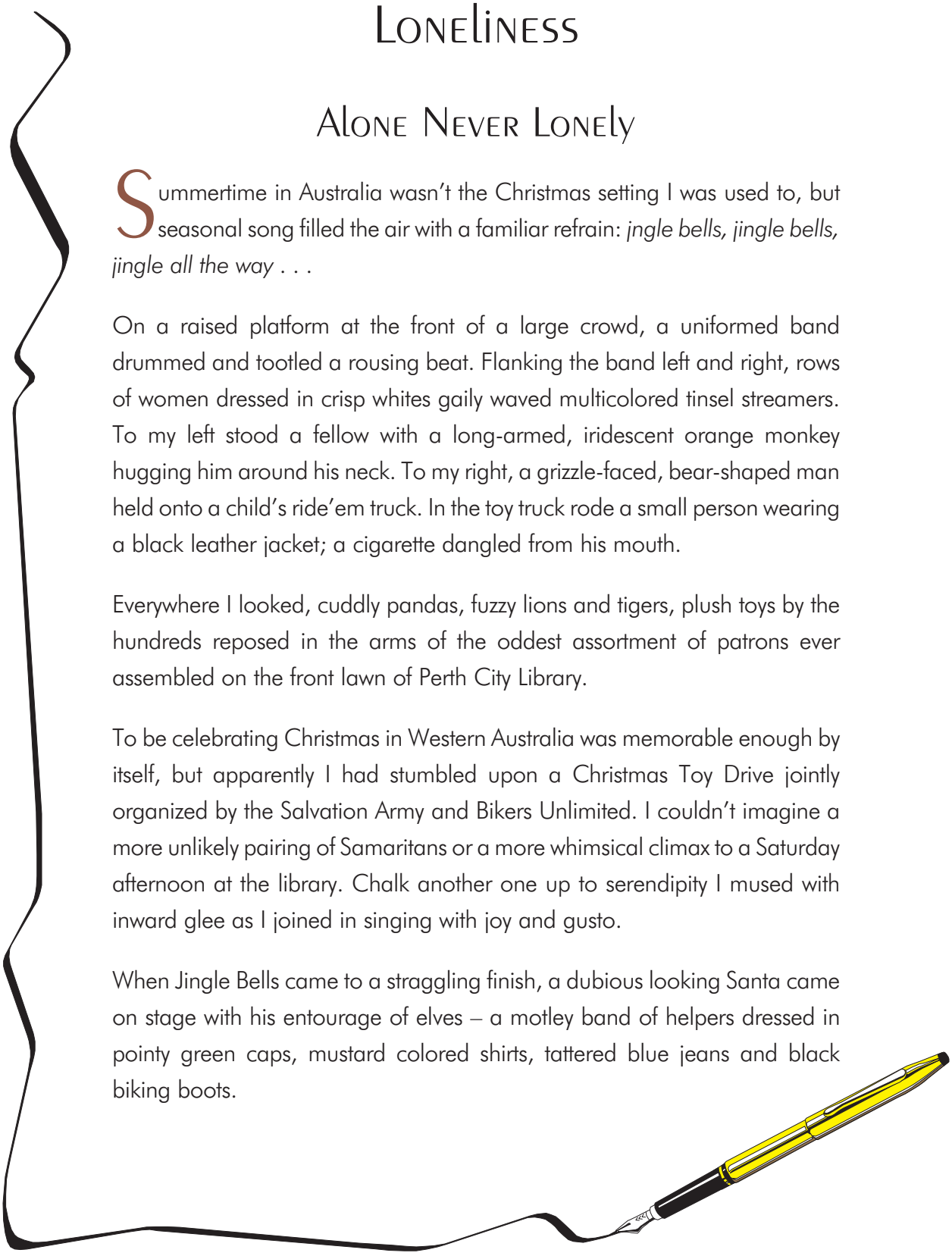
Summertime in Australia wasn't the Christmas setting I was used to, but seasonal song filled the air with a familiar refrain: *jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way . . .*

On a raised platform at the front of a large crowd, a uniformed band drummed and tootled a rousing beat. Flanking the band left and right, rows of women dressed in crisp whites gaily waved multicolored tinsel streamers. To my left stood a fellow with a long-armed, iridescent orange monkey hugging him around his neck. To my right, a grizzle-faced, bear-shaped man held onto a child's ride'em truck. In the toy truck rode a small person wearing a black leather jacket; a cigarette dangled from his mouth.

Everywhere I looked, cuddly pandas, fuzzy lions and tigers, plush toys by the hundreds reposed in the arms of the oddest assortment of patrons ever assembled on the front lawn of Perth City Library.

To be celebrating Christmas in Western Australia was memorable enough by itself, but apparently I had stumbled upon a Christmas Toy Drive jointly organized by the Salvation Army and Bikers Unlimited. I couldn't imagine a more unlikely pairing of Samaritans or a more whimsical climax to a Saturday afternoon at the library. Chalk another one up to serendipity I mused with inward glee as I joined in singing with joy and gusto.

When Jingle Bells came to a straggling finish, a dubious looking Santa came on stage with his entourage of elves – a motley band of helpers dressed in pointy green caps, mustard colored shirts, tattered blue jeans and black biking boots.



SALVATION

Santa grabbed the microphone and enthusiastically shouted in a distinct Aussie drawl, "Ain't this fun mates?" The mates and I responded with whoops of approval.

Santa continued, "But it's too dammed hot here downunder. Me and the elves gotta get back to the North Pole quick. But before we go, let's have three cheers for the police. They've been pretty good to us this year."

And so, amid hoots of "HIP HIP HOORAY!" the Bikers Unlimited folk gradually dispersed to their Harley's, Suzuki's and Yamaha's and roared off into the blue yonder, one and all presumably contemplating future good deeds.

And me? Brimming with Christmas spirit, I sauntered into the library's cool interior and resumed my holiday letter-writing with much more motivation than only an hour before.

See Going Solo Tips

Alone

Africaaaaa.

Magic

There is a Land of Oz

The dream child moving through a land
Of wonders wild and new

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

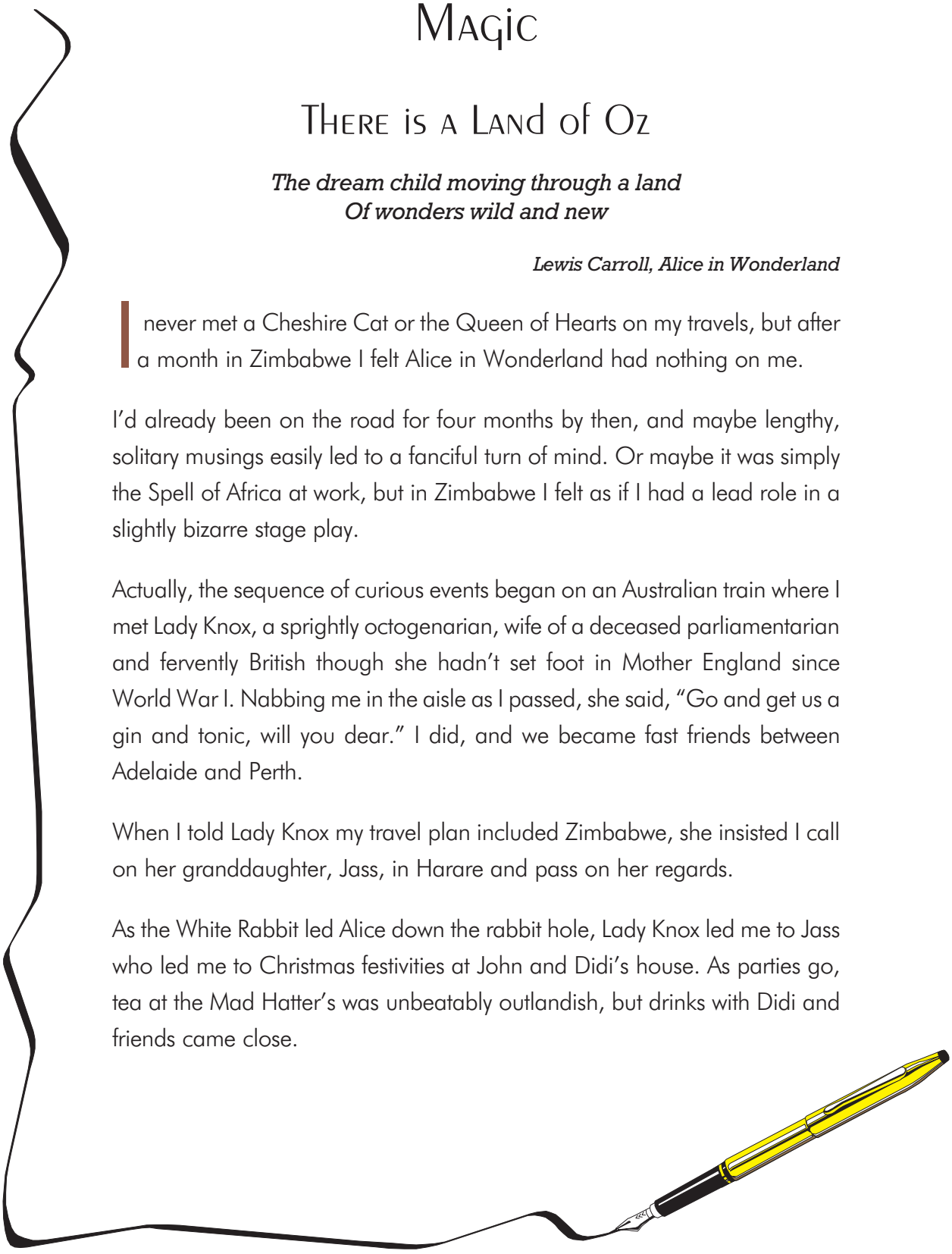
I never met a Cheshire Cat or the Queen of Hearts on my travels, but after a month in Zimbabwe I felt Alice in Wonderland had nothing on me.

I'd already been on the road for four months by then, and maybe lengthy, solitary musings easily led to a fanciful turn of mind. Or maybe it was simply the Spell of Africa at work, but in Zimbabwe I felt as if I had a lead role in a slightly bizarre stage play.

Actually, the sequence of curious events began on an Australian train where I met Lady Knox, a sprightly octogenarian, wife of a deceased parliamentarian and fervently British though she hadn't set foot in Mother England since World War I. Nabbing me in the aisle as I passed, she said, "Go and get us a gin and tonic, will you dear." I did, and we became fast friends between Adelaide and Perth.

When I told Lady Knox my travel plan included Zimbabwe, she insisted I call on her granddaughter, Jass, in Harare and pass on her regards.

As the White Rabbit led Alice down the rabbit hole, Lady Knox led me to Jass who led me to Christmas festivities at John and Didi's house. As parties go, tea at the Mad Hatter's was unbeatably outlandish, but drinks with Didi and friends came close.



"Oh no! I couldn't possibly intrude at Christmas." I protested.

"Nonsense!" said Didi. "We're 13 now and I've been dreading it. You'll make 14. Come along now, it's all arranged. We'll play tennis."

"I'm afraid I don't play tennis."

"That doesn't matter," replied Didi. "We won't play either. It's bound to rain."

"Oh, I see..." but I didn't quite.

The rambling old farm house, an assemblage of jutting parts and angles, numerous rooms with high ceilings, dark timber, rock, brick and flagstone fireplaces, was a grand if somewhat creaky relic of early colonial Rhodesia. Didi's grandfather had settled in those parts in the l890's along with the Cecil Rhodes crowd.

A black and white, gray-whiskered terrier greeted my arrival, bouncing wildly in circles around me. "Get down Peppi!" yelled Didi, whom I recall as looking perky and pink, dressed as she was in pink blouse, pink slacks and pink sneakers. Didi knows her place in the world, likes it just fine, welcomes you into it, and you must take her as you find her.

Despite orders Peppi could not restrain his bouncing, and we followed exuberantly behind Didi through the airy center of the house. In the back garden two enormous black labs waggled toward me with snuffly snouts and thrashing tails intent on outdoing Peppi the terrier.

"Satchmo! You wretched beast," yelled Didi at the big male then turned to consider the tennis court, which she pronounced unfit for play. Why I didn't ask because I was busily engaged in passionate embrace with Satchmo who had seized the moment to leap. With big, mud-reddened paws around my neck he lapped my face with slurpy kisses.

"Satchmo!" shrieked Didi. "Oh dear me! Diane, you must take those muddied things off and we'll put them in the washer."

Fortunately, I like animals and pooh-poohed this suggestion. Summoning up my best manners, I brushed the incident aside, saying, "They'll wash later. Don't worry. As long your friends won't think me strange."

"Good heavens, no," laughed Didi. "Everyone who comes here knows they have to put up with dogs."

With that, and as tennis was not on, we moved to a side garden to sip gin under a brilliantly red, flowering flamboyant tree while waiting for the other guests. A flock of large white geese arrived first.

Satchmo and the geese began a game of tag. The geese fluttered and hissed as Satchmo pranced round and round, keeping just out of reach. Several portly, feather-footed chickens strutted pompously in and out of the fray, adding a staccato clucking to the hubbub. The female lab watched demurely from the sidelines, and a half-dozen multi-colored cats observed with yawning disdain from various heights, under chairs, on the backs of lounges, up in tree limbs.

Didi's husband John joined us. He was a good looking man of 70, jolly in that "by-Jove" British sort of way. Fond of a joke and just as happy to be the butt of one, his hearty, infectious laughter always ended with a complementary wheeze. Born to the minor British aristocracy, he went into the army as was customary back then. Stationed in Africa, he settled there after his stint.

Didi, trim, vivacious and witty, is John's third wife and more than 20 years his junior. John is Didi's second husband.

While I heard this family history, partners of earlier matrimonial alliances gradually joined the party.

There was Gren, whose first wife, Diane, had run off with Didi's first husband whose name I forget.

There was John's former (second) wife Jean who had run off with some chap who had six children. Something, I forget what, happened to him and Jean had been left with his six children plus two of her own by John.

In the meantime, John and Jean divorced and John married Didi.

Gren then considered marrying Jean but, deterred by the idea of being saddled with eight kids, he decided to marry someone else. That marriage also floundered. Then Gren finally saw the light and married Jean despite all those kids.

And here they were with assorted offspring sharing Christmas cheer with me and taking much delight in befuddling me with their confusing tales of cross-connubial connections. Sly winks and behind-the-hand asides embellished their stories with innuendo. If painful memories still burned within they were outwardly extinguished by laughter. Their collective motto seemed to be that life is a funny hoax, and you might as well laugh at it as cry over it.

As afternoon wore on, hair-raising accounts of escapades with lions, crocodiles and native uprisings replaced familial topics. Meanwhile, Baby Emma, two weeks old, was thought to be sleeping

peacefully on a spare bed. However, when her mother, Bridgette (product of John and Jean) went to check, Emma was found to be wide awake. Showing every sign of adapting quickly to her eccentric family, she was cooing contentedly and not a bit perturbed to be in the company of many, many fleas.

The flea-carrying culprit had vanished the scene and could not easily be detected as fleas are perfectly natural and plentiful during rainy season in Africa. General speculation shared the opinion that of the three dogs and six cats, Satchmo wore the guiltiest look. Then again it was noted that a goose or two had not lately been seen among the flock.

As if these events were not enough to warrant a most memorable Christmas, the clincher came with Satchmo bearing two gifts for me – much to my astonishment. The first was a box of chocolates from Didi and John. The second was a tube of "Travel Suds" from Satchmo along with a note apologizing for his over-exuberant greeting.

While this Christmas spent in Africa will ever rank high on my list of really special days, it was just one among several curious experiences I enjoyed during my stay in Harare. Others included a close encounter with a lioness in heat, a too-close encounter with an ecstatic group of born-again Christians, a spectral visit from a lone bag-piper playing *Auld Lang Syne* under my window on New Year's Eve, and an extraordinary day-trip in the company of a Russian-trained undercover policeman named Rex and his friend named Gift who said he had already met me – in a dream.

But these are stories for another time. Now, I must get on with my African safari.

See Going Solo Tips

Safety Tips

Social Issues, Words for Women

Steam Train to Victoria Falls

I was in Harare, planning my first solo African safari, and my Zimbabwean acquaintances could not understand why I wanted to ride an aged steam train to Victoria Falls. "That filthy old thing! It's slower than a balking mule and twice as crotchety. Take you all night. Why don't you fly?"

I didn't want to fly. I wanted the Africa of my daydreams. In my Africa people and places remained untouched by progress. Chugging along in a puffer-billy train fit the image perfectly. That's why I joined the raucous throng of travelers and well-wishers crowding the platform at Bulawayo rail station. The exuberant clamor grew as I strolled down the line from First-class past Second, Third and finally to the Fourth class coaches, which were absolutely jammed with men, women and children packed onto rough wooden seats. But judging from the laughter and joking going on, they didn't mind the primitive conditions one bit.

When the old steamer rolled out shortly after 7pm, it whistled and tooted, whooshed and hissed just as I imagined an African train ought to do. Darkness soon followed. I opened the compartment window and hung out listening to the chirping of night creatures. Enveloped in star-spangled, velvety black, the train went chuga-chuga, chuga-chuga down the track, and I thrilled to the romance of it all.

The 450-km rail trip would take 12 hours because the schedule allowed for many stops along the way; that circumstance I expected. The lurching and screeching of wheels as we came to a wheezing halt also struck me as quaintly fitting for the occasion. I thought it novel and amusing to watch as the scores of passengers scrambled off the train at a rural outpost consisting of little more than a hut. Where did they go? The blackness seemed devoid of human habitation. That novelty soon wore thin, however, as a party of unwelcome stowaways boarded simultaneously with the departing passengers. At each stop hordes of flying insects flapped in my open window. The trouble was my window jammed. I could not get it closed and couldn't find a steward to lend a hand.

Finally I gave up trying and escaped head and all into my bedroll. To get a whiff of fresh air I'd contrive to make a slit in the bedding just big enough to poke my nose out quickly before an assortment of moths and beetles could use it for a landing perch.

Around 4am I emerged from my cocoon and realized the insects had disappeared with the rising sun. But now, as I groped my way from undercover, everything I touched felt gritty. What the . . .? Bingo! Steam engines eat coal and belch ash and cinders out the stack – in this case straight down

the line into my open window, all night long. Ash had seeped everywhere. My shoes and clothes were layered with soot. My scalp felt lumpy. My eyes, throat and nose felt dry and scratchy.

Dive-bombing insects. Head full of cinders. My Harare friends were right about that train. It was a filthy old thing. But! my romantic vision of Africa was intact.

Cinders, well, they wash off. And being awake at dawn was timely for catching fleeting glimpses of unfettered wildlife parading near the track. By the time the train pulled into Victoria Falls Station just after 9am – two hours late – I had enjoyed a railside view of a warthog family, antelope in twos and threes, several troupes of baboons, and flocks of vultures wheeling high in the sky or hunched on poles.

The morning was fresh, clear and mild. At that time of day Victoria Falls village presented few outward signs of its famous attraction, except for a persistent, low, rumbling sound as if a thunderstorm were assembling somewhere in the distance.

Yes, I thought, here is Africa. No city noise. No glitzy neon. No groomed parklands. Just a campsite, a few shops and a scattering of hotels.

I rented a cottage at the nearby rest camp, showered and ate breakfast before going in search of *Mosi-oa-Tunya* - The Smoke That Thunders. This is the spot where the Zambezi river, nearly two kilometers in width, plunges into a l08 meter deep chasm.

Aimed for the floating mist rising in smoke-like puffs on the horizon, I followed a pathway through mixed woodland, meeting along the way an uninterested baboon or two, a bobbing guinea fowl, a skittering lizard and an abundance of butterflies. The incessant rumbling intensified like a deep, sonorous drum roll as I entered the mist-nurtured forest edging the periphery of the chasm. Within this cool, green inner sanctum, peace and serenity prevailed. A gentle rustle and a flicker of movement, a small doe-eyed creature, probably a gazelle, interrupted grazing to glance at me inquiringly, her nose and ears a-twitch. No harm here she decided and resumed her delicate browsing.

Intertwining pathways led to several different lookout points, and I was inevitably drawn to Danger Point where the river flows tumultuously into the captivating embrace of an ever deepening and widening yet unyielding gorge.

Missionary explorer Dr David Livingstone is credited with being the first white man to set eyes, in 1855, on the Falls. Said not to have been a man of whimsy, Livingstone was, nevertheless, moved to

note poetically, "On sights as beautiful as this angels in their flight must have gazed." I knew exactly what he meant. For a close encounter with nature's forces both benign and formidable, Victoria Falls cannot be beat. Even the most pragmatic soul could not help making cosmic connections in such a setting.

The churning torrent below diffused skyward in a vaporous blue backdrop for multi iridescent rainbows. In blissful solitude I sat safely stretched out on a rocky outcropping overlooking the thundering cataract, arms and head thrown back to absorb the warming rays of sunshine. Thankfully I had the place to my self for a short time. With no intrusions on my thoughts save the sound of the river rushing, I had no trouble at all imagining those rainbows as a stairway to heaven.

A pretty good first safari, Africa. What else have you in store?

See Going Solo Tips

Alone

Strangers

To me it's a marvel explicable only in terms of karmic ties, how the paths of two human beings from totally different backgrounds suddenly converge thousands of miles from home. For a few hours, maybe a few days, their lives intertwine in a single story like threads in a tapestry. Then, as if the pattern is complete and the threads snipped, they depart in opposite directions, never to meet again. What remains is only a memory that fades in time or flourishes in fantasy. I do not know if Peter remembers me. But I remember Peter.

I remember walking toward the Victoria Falls Hotel expecting to dine alone as usual. I remember the train station, walking the platform and footsteps overtaking me from behind. Like all women walking alone in unfamiliar territory, I was alert to possible danger, my hand clutched tightly to the money belt at my waist. Then I remember relaxing and falling into friendly conversation with the tall, fair-haired New Zealander whose stride met mine and who, as fate would have it, also expected to eat alone.

Instead, we ate together, Peter and I, outdoors on the terrace of the Victoria Falls Hotel. A constant low, rumbling reverberated from the river in the distance. Sounds of singing insects mingled with a tinkling marimba rhythm, and dainty breezes carried garden scents to our table. Starshine flickered in Peter's eyes, and I thought they were the bluest eyes I had ever seen.

Magic must have been afoot that night, otherwise, I cannot explain why I stepped so totally out of character the next day. I had planned to follow the typical tourist route back to Harare with stopovers at Hwange National Park and Lake Kariba. On a whim I switched to Peter's plan and went hitchhiking, a form of transportation I normally disdain as tedious at best and downright dangerous at worst.

Peter had his heart set on seeing Botswana's Okavango Delta, a 15,000 sq km inland maze of lagoons, channels and islands teeming with African wildlife. Chances of getting there were slim. Road conditions were iffy in January with the onset of rainy season. We had no tent, no food, and meager finances nixed joining an organized safari or renting a vehicle. I hadn't the proper clothing or footwear, not even a backpack, only a small suitcase easy to handle for short distances but hardly the gear for hitchhiking.

I must have been bewitched. I didn't even need persuading. I actually asked to go along. And Peter was game to have me, although I suspect he had second thoughts when I started down the road to Kazungula pulling a squeaky-wheeled suitcase behind me.

Two kilometers from town we stopped at the main junction and waited for a lift under the shade of a large tree. Still beguiled by the spirit of adventure and using my suitcase as a backrest, I cheerfully sat and listened to the sounds of drums and chanting wafting from some nearby unseen village. Africa called, but two hours at the side of the road brought us no closer to the Okavango Delta. Only three vehicles had passed. The first stopped and picked up a local group of wayfarers headed for Namibia. The second, an army truck going in the wrong direction, pulled up, and its driver offered us a drink of water. The third whizzed right on by.

Just as we decided it was time to lift our numb bums and retreat toward Victoria Falls, a pick-up truck rumbled into view and stopped in response to our enthusiastic shouting and waving. Its occupants – a Brit named Dave and two Australians, Kathy and Jenny – decided we weren't dangerous lunatics and said "hop aboard." Only "aboard" meant squeezing in between the camping gear stowed in the back.

Riding in the back of a pick-up truck, scrunched between boxes, poles and tarpaulins is as uncomfortable as it sounds, and it doesn't do much for your hairdo either. As for the complexion, burnt red isn't becoming if you ask me, but Peter beamed his wonderful grin and yelled over the roaring wind, "You look great!" That was all I needed to calm any residual misgivings.

That night we stayed in a campsite by the Zambezi River. A fantastic lightning and thunder storm hit, but we were cosy in a tiny rented camper and, together with our new companions, we shared supper, a bottle of brandy, and lots of travel tales. Dave and Kathy were contract teachers heading home to Botswana after a camping trip in Zimbabwe. Jenny was just out from Australia getting a feel for the teacher's life in Africa. Peter was betwixt and between continuing medical studies, or taking a volunteer post in Tonga. And I was having the adventure of my life.

The next day the teachers dropped us off at a place called Nata Lodge about 270 km into Botswana and near the junction for Okavango Delta. As it turned out, road conditions kept us from reaching Okavango. That was a disappointment, but we did cover quite a bit of territory between Victoria Falls and Francistown, Botswana before circling back to Zimbabwe via Bulawayo.

In our four days together, Peter and I grumbled a little and laughed a lot. We got sunburned, wind-blown, rain drenched, and we argued about who had the better hitchhiking technique. We saw elephants browsing on the veldt and imagined we heard lions calling one another at night. We talked local politics with Africans under the shade of roadside trees and witnessed other "only in Africa" peculiarities, like the mysterious smoking tree. That happened in Francistown while Peter was off scouting out bus and train departures, and I remained on baggage guard. Before my eyes a tree

across the street suddenly began to smoke – no flames just a distinctively smoke-like substance coiled up from a juncture of limbs. A hubbub ensued, the local fire brigade arrived, the tree was doused, everybody went about their business, and I was none the wiser.

The last image I have of Peter was seeing him off at the bus station in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. We waved goodbye, wished one another a fond farewell, and I've never heard of him since. I never miss him, but I won't ever forget him.

See Going Solo Tips

Safety Tips

Social Issues

Alone

Health

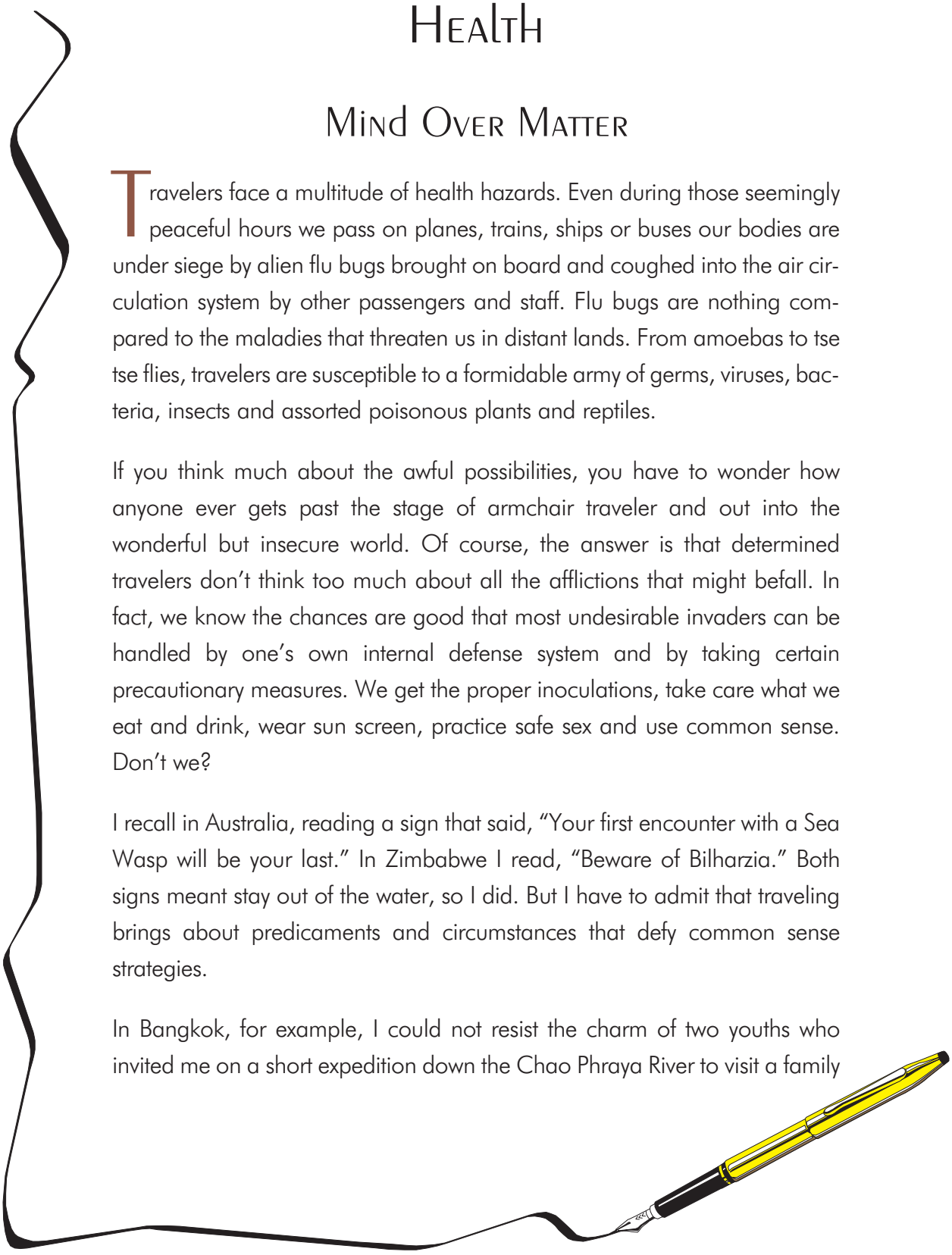
Mind Over Matter

Travelers face a multitude of health hazards. Even during those seemingly peaceful hours we pass on planes, trains, ships or buses our bodies are under siege by alien flu bugs brought on board and coughed into the air circulation system by other passengers and staff. Flu bugs are nothing compared to the maladies that threaten us in distant lands. From amoebas to tse tse flies, travelers are susceptible to a formidable army of germs, viruses, bacteria, insects and assorted poisonous plants and reptiles.

If you think much about the awful possibilities, you have to wonder how anyone ever gets past the stage of armchair traveler and out into the wonderful but insecure world. Of course, the answer is that determined travelers don't think too much about all the afflictions that might befall. In fact, we know the chances are good that most undesirable invaders can be handled by one's own internal defense system and by taking certain precautionary measures. We get the proper inoculations, take care what we eat and drink, wear sun screen, practice safe sex and use common sense. Don't we?

I recall in Australia, reading a sign that said, "Your first encounter with a Sea Wasp will be your last." In Zimbabwe I read, "Beware of Bilharzia." Both signs meant stay out of the water, so I did. But I have to admit that traveling brings about predicaments and circumstances that defy common sense strategies.

In Bangkok, for example, I could not resist the charm of two youths who invited me on a short expedition down the Chao Phraya River to visit a family



POISON!
GOOD HEALTH
COMMON SENSE
SPIRIT
DANGER...

of fruit farmers. My adventurous spirit leapt at the chance to experience Thai lifestyle, but six hours later in 35C degree heat, 99 percent humidity and the last of my bodily fluids dripping off the end of my nose, I was grateful, if squeamish, to accept a glass of murky river water – boiled they said. Of course river water was all the family had, for cooking, washing, bathing, and drinking, just like everyone else in that river side community. I drank the water and survived without so much as a grumble in the tummy.

The experts say that eating salads and ice cream in "third world" countries is asking for trouble. I can't disagree, but again I have to admit to having carelessly tempted fate in that regard on more than one occasion. Still, I survived.

Solo travelers are especially vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases while on the road. After all, virtually no one wants to be alone all the time. And when you need a little human company, a chance encounter with a stranger may lead to harmless flirtation. If the vibes and circumstances gibe, flirtation may induce raging hormones, weak knees, fluttering heart, and nature is liable to dictate its course heedless of safe sex techniques.

Some experts say that good health has as much to do with state of mind as anything else. For me, that logic had proven true five months into my around-the-world journey. Up to that point, the only disagreeable invasions my body had endured were a few excess pounds of fat, which were lodging on my hips as I began my sojourn in South Africa.

At that time in South Africa, the "Apartheid" regime, though losing grip, still had a place in law. I wanted to see and feel for myself what this Apartheid idea was all about, and I intended on spending at least two months in the country.

At first I was encouraged to find that the system seemed much less restrictive than I had expected. Within hours of my arrival in Johannesburg as I checked into a hotel located in a so-called "white" district, a black woman checked in just ahead of me. I recall lunching at the five-star Carlton Hotel and noting white waiters serving customers both black and white. In banks and other institutions, I observed all races working side by side. In Cape Town I rode the public transport, sitting beside people of every color. I saw prosperous looking black men driving expensive Mercedes and BMW's. Black artists seemed well regarded and represented in all media. And I was delighted to hear that the most popular television program of the day was *The Bill Cosby Show*.

As time went on, however, I also experienced the true depth of racial prejudice. In countless small ways, remarks overheard, expressions observed, warnings given, fears expressed, I soon understood

that ethnic feelings go very deep in South Africa, not only between whites and blacks, but also between whites and "coloreds," coloreds and blacks, and between blacks and blacks.

Though I never saw a single incidence of trouble myself, newspapers were full of township hooliganism, horrendous "necklace" trials, and riots at miners' hostels.

White society lamented the state of things and what they feared would be the loss of "their beautiful" South Africa, a country not only bountiful in resources, scenically diverse, and blessed with an extraordinary cultural heritage, but also functional to European standards.

By the time I had been in the country six weeks, a vague but growing sense of discontent began to darken my mood. Why? The weather was great, the living cheap. I could afford clean, pleasant lodgings, and the food was comfortingly familiar. Something difficult to define gnawed at me, but what? The answer dawned while riding a segregated bus – one of only two I encountered. I was traveling along the "Garden Route," that spectacular stretch of mountainous terrain bordering the southern coastline of the continent. A sheet of metal walled off a few "white" designated seats from the rest of the bus, but I figured the black African passengers had a better time of it than I and two other white tourists, because we had to tolerate the driver's non-stop musical renditions of his American country western favorites delivered with a South African twang.

Out the window I could see passengers embarking and disembarking at the back as we stopped at every little burg between George and Knysna. That's when it occurred to me that my South African experience had so far been shallow and relegated to a superficial "white" viewpoint. I had seen but not associated with even one black South African, except for hotel servants.

In Knysna, a pretty little resort town, I wanted to stay by the seaside away from town center, but without a car I would be isolated out there, the only transport being a "colored" bus. There was no law against my taking it, but as I was told, "It just isn't done, too dangerous, you being white." I could have but didn't argue. Instead, being lily-livered, I gave up the chance for a restful seaside retreat.

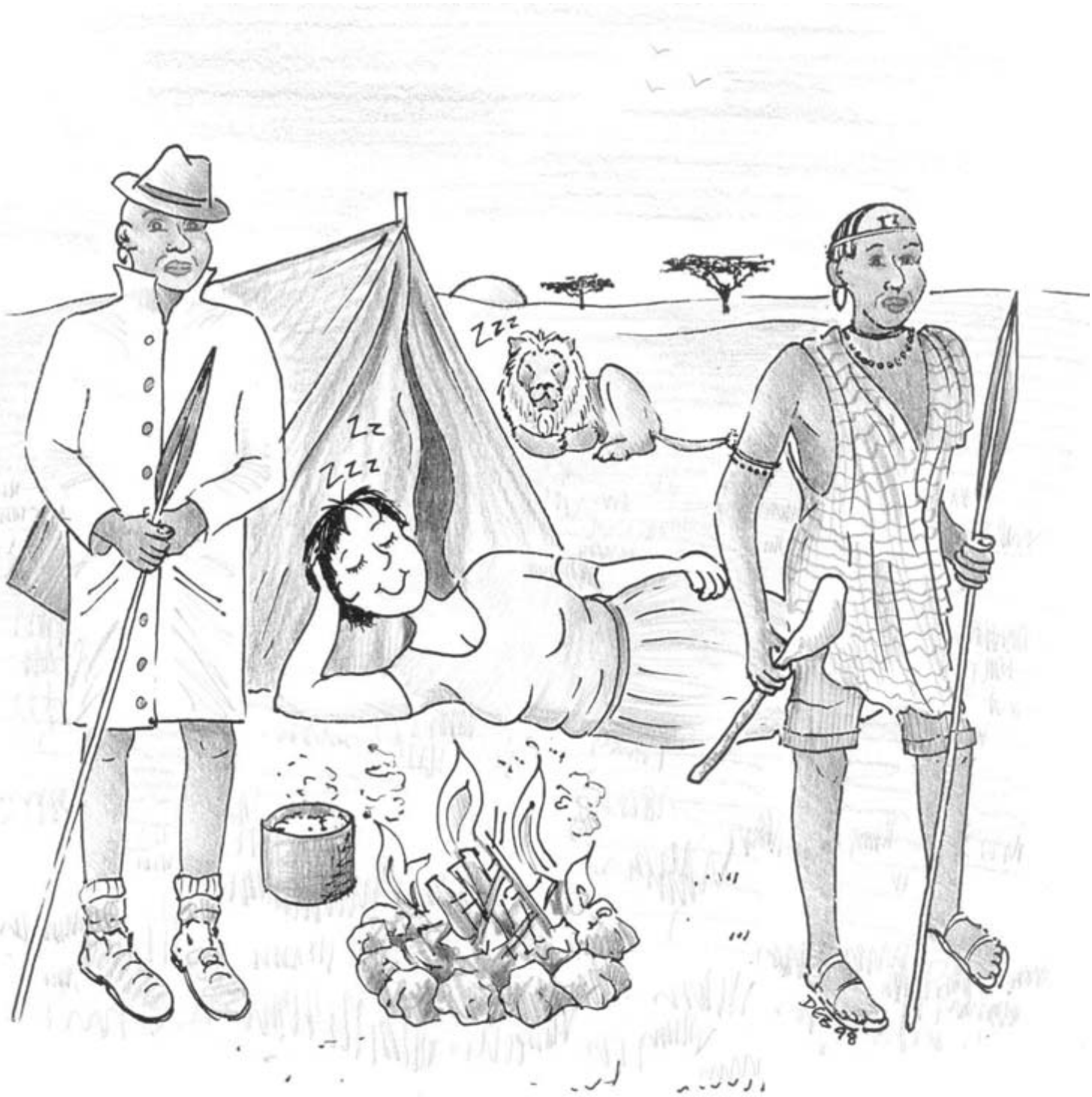
Apartheid had succeeded in stirring up fear in me. Disgruntled, I moved on with a feeling of oppression weighing on my mind. In Port Elizabeth I stopped over in a good quality three-star hotel. The city was rife with political argument. A black man had challenged the "whites only" law at a local beach. An international team of diplomats had arrived to impress world opinion upon city officials. Tension was palpable. Although it was an extremely fascinating time to be there, I felt low in spirit. Next came nausea, then stomach cramps, then for two miserable days I was very ill, managing only to stagger between bed and bathroom.

Something I ate or drank? I suppose so. I only know for sure that the sterile environment of Apartheid had stymied my bodily defenses whereas Bangkok river water had not.

See Going Solo Tips

Are You Sure You're Insured?

Health Issues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Time and Change

On Safari

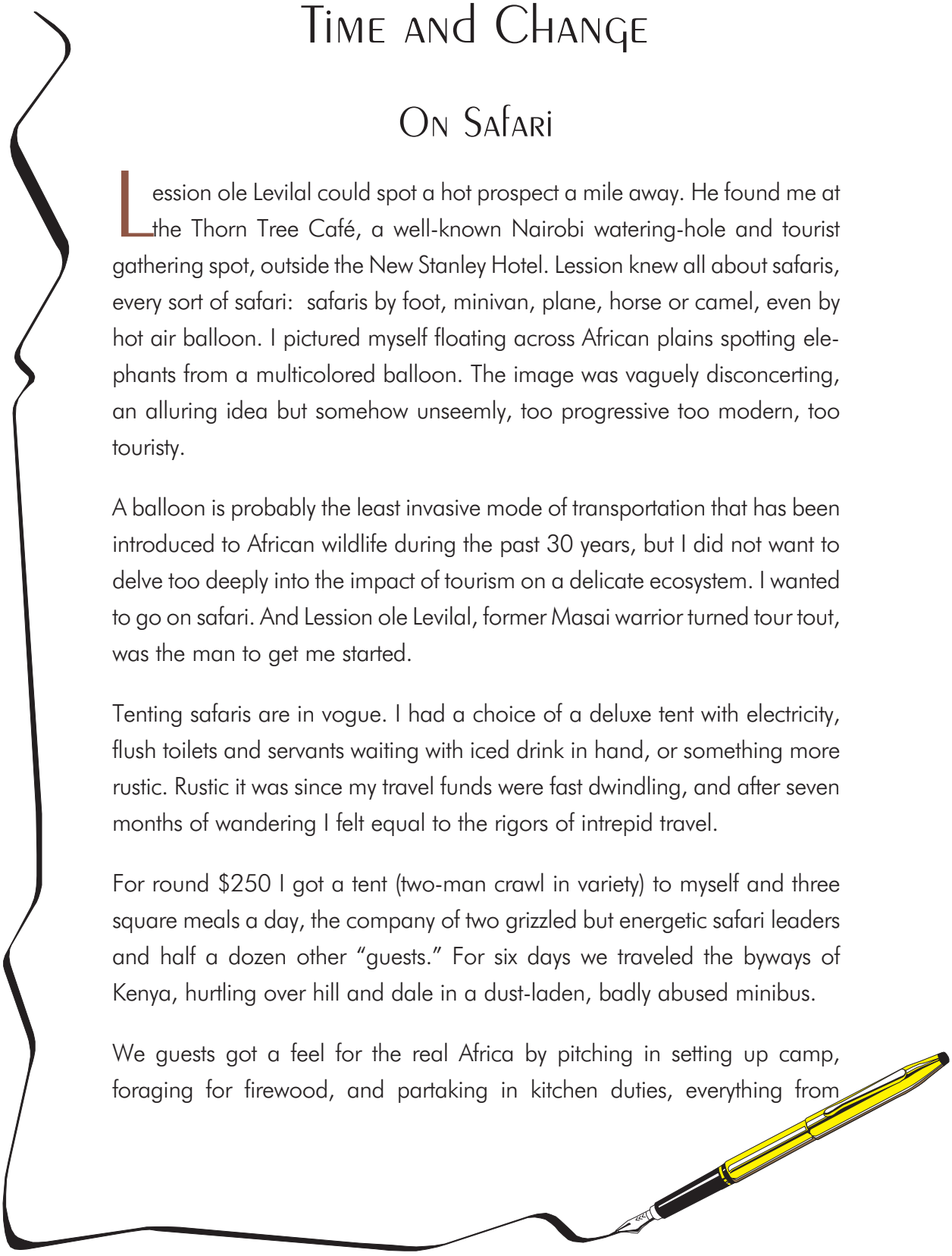
Lession ole Levilal could spot a hot prospect a mile away. He found me at the Thorn Tree Café, a well-known Nairobi watering-hole and tourist gathering spot, outside the New Stanley Hotel. Lession knew all about safaris, every sort of safari: safaris by foot, minivan, plane, horse or camel, even by hot air balloon. I pictured myself floating across African plains spotting elephants from a multicolored balloon. The image was vaguely disconcerting, an alluring idea but somehow unseemly, too progressive too modern, too touristy.

A balloon is probably the least invasive mode of transportation that has been introduced to African wildlife during the past 30 years, but I did not want to delve too deeply into the impact of tourism on a delicate ecosystem. I wanted to go on safari. And Lession ole Levilal, former Masai warrior turned tour tout, was the man to get me started.

Tenting safaris are in vogue. I had a choice of a deluxe tent with electricity, flush toilets and servants waiting with iced drink in hand, or something more rustic. Rustic it was since my travel funds were fast dwindling, and after seven months of wandering I felt equal to the rigors of intrepid travel.

For round $250 I got a tent (two-man crawl in variety) to myself and three square meals a day, the company of two grizzled but energetic safari leaders and half a dozen other "guests." For six days we traveled the byways of Kenya, hurtling over hill and dale in a dust-laden, badly abused minibus.

We guests got a feel for the real Africa by pitching in setting up camp, foraging for firewood, and partaking in kitchen duties, everything from



peeling potatoes to chasing off carrot stealing monkeys. Dust was plentiful, drinking water scarce, bathing was infrequent, and toilet facilities were primitive.

David, the cook, directed proceedings around camp, doling out chores and hearty meals with maximum cheerfulness and minimum English: "Eat, Mama eat."

James, our driver, found the wildlife. He wasn't much of a naturalist, couldn't tell you much about the intimate habits of the gnu, hadn't much to say about the vegetation, but he could find the whereabouts of elephant, rhino or giraffe. All James needed was an inkling, a sniff of the air, a stray comment from a passing safari leader, and we were off in hot pursuit with a chorus of "We want lion! We want leopard!"

With the van bellowing like a whipped ox we went plummeting over grassy plain and rough hillock, bypassing potholes and boulders by a hair's breadth. I don't recall that any of us gave a thought to the smaller flora and fauna we were riding roughshod over. It was yahoo! and ride'em cowboy! all the way.

In Kenya the big game keep to huge reserves, huge enough that it takes some doing to track the animals down, so the chase is not entirely without skill, and certainly not without thrill. James found hippos at Lake Baringo and crocodiles in a steamy river at the edge of the vast Serengeti. On the plains of Masai Mara, he deftly dodged multitudes of herd animals so used to passing vehicles they hardly bothered to move aside as vans passed, sometimes in procession as the words "cheetah with a kill" filtered from one party to another. Grazing rhinos and elephants ignored us veering by, and a pride of lions merely yawned and flicked their tails when faced with yet another van full of camera-toting tourists half crazed with excitement. They cared nothing for their value as souvenir memorabilia.

One afternoon we set up camp at Lake Nakuru, hoping to visit with its population of one million flamingoes. "But don't be disappointed if they've gone off to Lake Bogoria for the day," James said.

Luck was with us, the birds were at home, and prodded by our "oohs" and "ahhs," James edged the van onto the mud flats skirting the briny lake to get closer to the birds. Suddenly we came to a squelching, tilting stop.

"Uh, oh" Tittering and snickering passed through the guests. Unperturbed, James descended from the van to inspect the situation.

"Wheeeeuw!" whistled James from without when he saw the right front wheel mired up to the axle in a soft pocket of muck.

Hoots of laughter blared from within. We were a merry lot. "Ha! That's a good one. Well, let's get busy and dig 'er out, eh James? Say what? No shovel? No nothing?"

As we stood pondering this development, we were joined by another safari party, curious at our predicament. There followed a raucous consultation in English, French, German, Dutch, Flemish and Swahili, during which it was decided that James and Walter (the other safari driver) should go in search of rescue equipment.

"No problem," said James, still unperturbed.

While James and Walter went to secure our rescue, the rest of us were left standing in the black ooze, encircled by a million disinterested flamingoes and one impertinent Marabou stork that flew in to have a look see and stood about staring with a comical smirk on its beak.

Much later, after a chilling, rain threatening wind had replaced the heat of the day, dusk had risen on the horizon, the tourists had repeated each of their life stories, and all were well and truly filled with the sight of one million flamingoes, James and Walter returned. In tow were four locals and a large dump truck equipped with a bundle of frayed, wispy cable and one – hallelujah! – shovel. The guests set to clearing the mired wheel, taking turns with the shovel. While one dug, the others amused themselves by discoursing at length on previous misadventures and remarking sarcastically on the style and vigor of each shoveler in turn.

Meanwhile, the safari leaders and friends held earnest and graphic discussions on the scraggly ball of cable and how it might possibly be used to get us out of the mess we were in.

At last, the digging was done, and now wispy bits of wire were being attached to certain dangling protuberances on the respective undersides of the dump truck and the van.

The drivers boarded the vehicles. The guests, sniggering skeptically, lined up on both sides of the van ready to push at the heave-ho signal. The other Africans directed proceedings from front and rear.

"Push!" they shouted. We pushed. The dump truck pulled. The van heaved. Engines roared. And the mangled cable popped as if it were a piece of thread. Variations on this theme continued with progressively shorter pieces of wire until the lark had gone well beyond fun. Darkness had fully settled and some of us held that it would be dangerous to proceed.

"No problem!" said James emphatically, and sent us back to camp with Walter.

Sometime after midnight the van wheezed into camp. Taking heed of James' expression, no one chose to speak of the incident again.

After that trauma, the van lost heart in the expedition and had always to be persuaded into any further participation. A push down the nearest hill (not always that near) imbibed some life into the disheartened vehicle. With a coughing start, it would begin lurching headlong downhill as if gaining a certain diabolical satisfaction in leaving the panting band of campers to give chase and clamber aboard as best they could.

As safaris go, this was a long way from the champagne variety, but it certainly brought me as close to the Africa of my imagination as it is possible to get in these changing times. We had three days camped by a trickling river in the Masai Mara Game Reserve where we relaxed into a routine of eating and idle contemplation in between game drives. One afternoon, I sat on a rock under a tree musing upon time and change. The sun streaked through a splendid cathedral-like cloud formation and splashed golden hues across the grassy, undulating plain. A group of shaven-headed Masai girls with beautiful white teeth appeared from nowhere. They'd come to show off their beads and pegged earlobes. Seeing me with pen and paper they demanded a turn at writing, then growing bored with that they sat for a time stroking the hair on my arms.

Later that night, inside the little tent, I thought to myself: You've come a long way since Vancouver, my girl. As I lay thinking about time and change, I could hear Masai donkeys and cattle calling, jackals yipping persistently, and not too far away a lion coughing. I felt safe and secure under the protection of two hired Masai men who cut a dignified stance despite the oddity of their dress. One wore traditional, handmade sandals and a shoulder cloth with factory-made shorts underneath, the other, safari shoes and socks, a buttoned-up raincoat and on his head, a plastic derby hat. Armed with spears and wooden clubs, they stood guard by a flickering campfire watching the night tick by with the aid of their digital watches. And I felt oh, so adventurous.

Travel-worn

Somewhere Between Heaven and Hell

Nearing eight months into my journey, I had to admit road weariness had begun to take a toll on me, and I figured a little bit of heaven would be just the thing to put the sparkle back into my wanderlust. Go to Lamu, they said. Lamu is heaven. An island retreat off Kenya's Indian Ocean coast, Lamu, according to the travelers' grapevine, is an idyllic trip back in time. No cars and heavy on interesting Arab influences.

They also said I should fly to Lamu and avoid treacherous roads and Somali bandits. Be that as it may, my decreasing cash supply increased my taste for adventure. With a visit to Lamu fondly impressed upon my mind, I persuaded myself to go by bus. Besides, they said the roads were dry and bandits hadn't struck for some time. Furthermore, just as I was making inquiries about the situation, a handsome Frenchman arrived to make similar enquiries. Overhearing the discussion between the clerk and myself, he said he planned to catch the bus to Lamu after dropping off his rental car and would first give me a lift to the bus station. My mind was made. I would go to Lamu.

Any designs I had on the Frenchman were soon dashed when his attractive female friend appeared, but at least I saved on cab fare to the bus station. About noon I took my assigned seat aboard a solid, respectable looking Tana River Transport bus parked in the dust at a Malindi service station, about five hours due south of Lamu.

An hour later, with the equatorial sun high and hot, the journey to Lamu seemed about to begin when a guy with a dipstick came on board wanting to check the oil. This was okay, except that bags, bundles, humanity, animal

hides and other odd things already filled every possible niche. A waist-high heap of stuff was even stored on top of the motor housing, which straddled the space between the driver and a lengthwise seat that faced the motor housing and the driver. I shared that seat with a Dutch couple, and we had earlier agreed how lucky we were to have a front-end view for the trip. Naturally the mechanic designated our laps for temporary baggage storage until he deemed the bus and its oil fit for travel.

With a semblance of order finally restored, the bus rumbled onto the highway only to stop again a few minutes down the road. Here, my seat mates and I gaped in amazement, as a dozen or more passengers emerged from a nondescript building and noisily forced themselves onto the completely full bus. Baffled, I observed the clamor with detachment – after all, I had a seat – until the irate face of a youth, aged about 18 or so, peered intently through the crowd and jarred my brain into realizing that he was shouting at me.

"Madam!" he said fiercely. "That is my seat since Mombasa. You must move!"

Similarly enraged conversations transpired between the seated and non-seated all over the bus. Someone was just as furious with the Dutch couple, and a lady with two children succeeded in routing a man and his small boy from their seats. These two were now trying to establish themselves astride a bundle of straw brooms atop the luggage piled on the motor housing.

Without trying to fathom the whys or wherefores of the situation I determined to keep my place come what may. I gave the fellow yelling at me a withering look and told him to take it up with the driver. Meanwhile, the driver had put the bus in motion and was whistling a happy tune, serenely oblivious to the pandemonium storming on about him. Obviously this scenario was not new to him.

Eventually the commotion subsided into angry glaring as the unseated resigned themselves to the situation. Not that anyone was having a luxurious time of it. I now had three seat mates, one more person having managed to cram onto "our" seat built for three. In fact, sardines in a can might be better off than we four. Our knees were jammed into the pile stacked and skittering around on the reverberating motor housing. The man and his boy, still stuck on top of the pile, clung to it as if they were riding a bucking bronco.

Some got seats as others left at stops along the way, but someone was always standing during the entire journey, and so we proceeded hour after hour in various states of misery. The African landscape changed from fertile coastal farmlands to thorny scrub country, dry, bleak and little changed for hundreds of years. The only evidence of the twentieth century was the odd village shopkeeper's sign advertising "Abdullah's Photo Shop," or something equally incongruous.

For a short distance between stops we had the company of a raving fanatic urging us all to repent our sins before it was too late. Evidently Lamu was on the way to hell not to heaven as we had supposed, and the front row passengers were first in line to feel the flames a'licking. Motor heat made the floor so burning hot to the feet, our only respite was to hoist our legs up onto the luggage between the brooms. Once, at a place called Garsen, we had to ford an inlet by a ferry that operated by rope pulley. We all got off to lend a hand hauling the bus across, and believe me that felt like blessed relief.

The road alternated from passable to barely passable, but at least Somali bandits kept their distance. About 5:30pm, the bus disgorged its 80 or 90 sorry passengers into steamy twilight and the hands of Sammy, a twinkle-eyed hotel tout who waited at an otherwise deserted seaside dock. Nothing like the town of Lamu was in sight. Sammy said a dhow (traditional boat) would soon arrive to fetch us to the island and he would lead the tourists – about nine of us – to the Dhow Lodge and the heavenly touch of a cooling shower.

Minutes later, a wooden craft resembling something between a large rowboat and a Chinese junk hove into view, and suddenly Sammy, grabbing my bag took off at a run.

"Come on!" he hissed, which started something of a stampede to dockside as everyone else concurrently realized that this vessel couldn't possibly carry us all.

Before the inbound passengers could even disembark, the waiting horde, myself included, barged aboard without regard for age, sex, manners or safety. I guess I was pretty good at the local way of doing things because I got seated on a plank alongside the gunwale. The little boat lurched and trembled, but every last soul found space on board. Bodies sprawled on the prow, clung to the masthead and stood cheek by jowl in the center. Luggage was stowed under deck and seats and spilled out around the motor housing, on laps, underfoot and between legs. Yet somehow the small crew boys managed to squeeze through the mass of humanity to collect 5 shillings from each and every person.

Early into the voyage I noted, with only vague concern, water bubbling up through the planks by the motor. Nudging the Dutch woman next to me, I pointed at the rising water and said vacantly, "We might drown." By now I figured African ways would pull us through somehow, and if not I wasn't sure I cared much, I was so tired.

The Dutch woman managed only a weary nod.

Sure enough, two tiny crew boys came tippy-toeing along the gunwales and slithered like snakes into the jumble of bodies and baggage near the motor. Considerable heaving, pushing and cursing opened a small clearing, a bucket was brought forth, and for the whole half-hour journey the boys bailed enough water to keep us afloat. They got us to the landing at Lamu Island with hardly a damp toe. A mob of hotel reps waited to pounce on the arriving tourists, but Sammy, rounding up his charges like an efficient sheep dog, ran to and fro commanding us not to listen to those "hustlers." We wouldn't have dreamt of it.

Like so many docile lambs we followed Sammy to the Dhow Lodge. We approached through a dusty, rubble infested yard, up a narrow, twisting stone staircase, down a dank, dark hallway into the dimly lit foyer. A sense of dejection settled over me as a lodge employee greeted us hesitantly with shuffling feet and wringing hands. Sheepishly he cleared his throat then blurted out, "We only have one double room left."

Murderous looks passed between the tourists, and Sammy, twitching nervously, cast furtive glances toward the nearest exit.

"But don't worry!" the clerk added hastily, "We can make room – on the roof."

"The roof!" I sputtered. "Nothing doing, I want a room to myself – with a shower and nice and clean."

I felt tears rising, then a reproving voice issued from a dark corner: "The Dhow Lodge is nice. And it is very nice on the roof. You get a bed with mosquito netting. There's covering against the rain, and there's a place to put your valuables. And it's cool. And it's only 15 shillings."

Chastened, I should have reconsidered, but I didn't. Instead, I followed Sammy to the New Mahrus Hotel. No doubt the roof of the Dhow Lodge would have been preferable to the airless, stifling but private room that exhaustion finally forced me to settle on for 75 shillings.

The narrow lanes and quaint architecture of Lamu might have appealed in other circumstances, but this time around the place was too hot and dusty to fit my idea of heaven. My spirit of adventure had been tweaked but now went into full retreat. Unwilling to face a return journey by bus, I blew my budget and flew, by aircraft, back to the cooler climes of Nairobi the next day.

But you know what? That easy, comfortable flight, I barely remember at all. The bus and Dhow story I'll be telling to my dying day.

Love

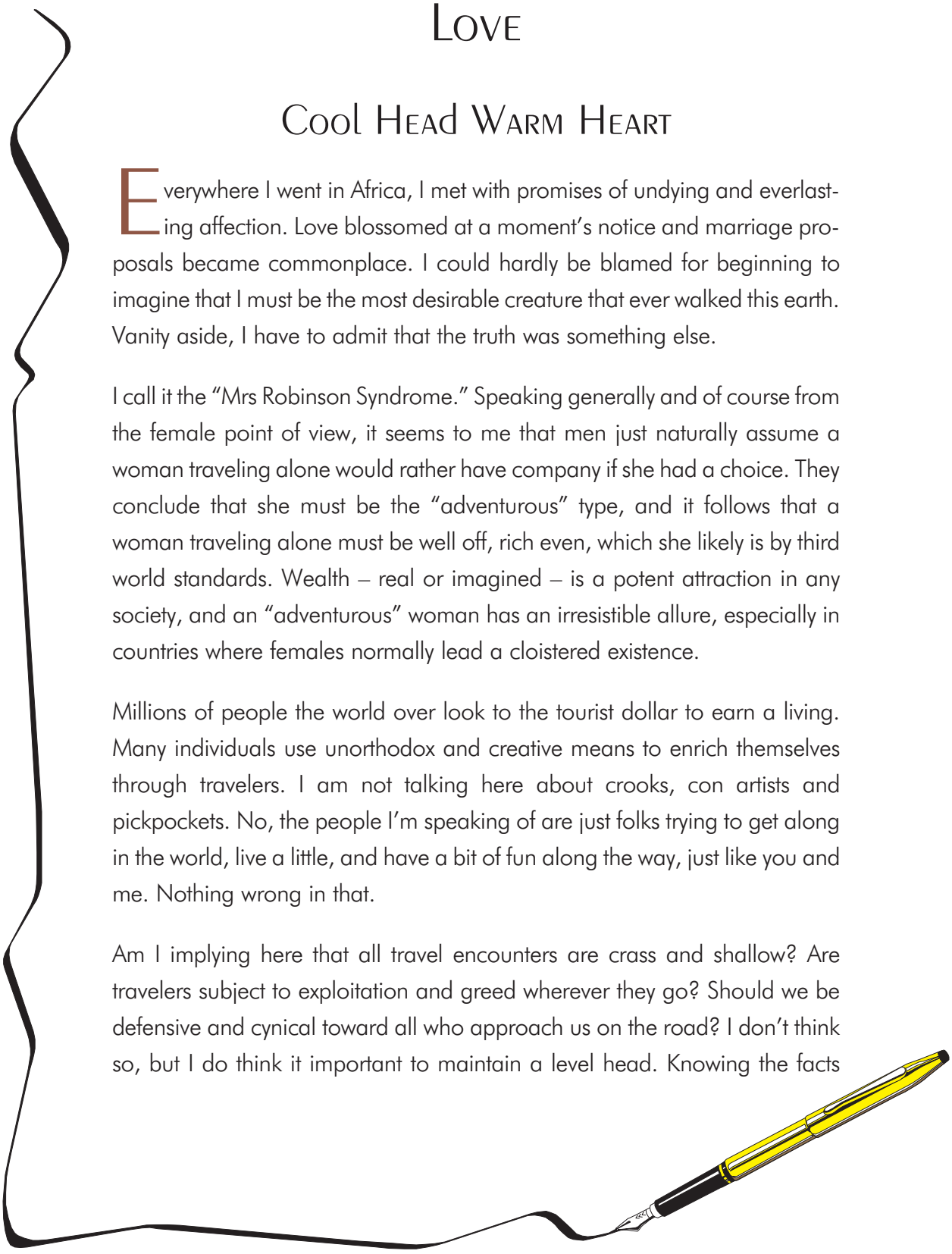
Cool Head Warm Heart

Everywhere I went in Africa, I met with promises of undying and everlasting affection. Love blossomed at a moment's notice and marriage proposals became commonplace. I could hardly be blamed for beginning to imagine that I must be the most desirable creature that ever walked this earth. Vanity aside, I have to admit that the truth was something else.

I call it the "Mrs Robinson Syndrome." Speaking generally and of course from the female point of view, it seems to me that men just naturally assume a woman traveling alone would rather have company if she had a choice. They conclude that she must be the "adventurous" type, and it follows that a woman traveling alone must be well off, rich even, which she likely is by third world standards. Wealth – real or imagined – is a potent attraction in any society, and an "adventurous" woman has an irresistible allure, especially in countries where females normally lead a cloistered existence.

Millions of people the world over look to the tourist dollar to earn a living. Many individuals use unorthodox and creative means to enrich themselves through travelers. I am not talking here about crooks, con artists and pickpockets. No, the people I'm speaking of are just folks trying to get along in the world, live a little, and have a bit of fun along the way, just like you and me. Nothing wrong in that.

Am I implying here that all travel encounters are crass and shallow? Are travelers subject to exploitation and greed wherever they go? Should we be defensive and cynical toward all who approach us on the road? I don't think so, but I do think it important to maintain a level head. Knowing the facts



should not destroy the value of having experiences we choose to have. At the same time we should be cognizant of some basic concepts of human nature, mainly that a streak of self-interest runs through every one of us. We are all in this game of life to get what we can out of it. So the world is full of charmers; nowhere is this more true than in Egypt.

I was nervous about Egypt. It was my first time alone in an Islamic country. Ali, a Sudanese journalist and my seat mate on the flight from Nairobi to Cairo, saw me through the first couple of days. Knowing Cairo well, he directed me to a decent hotel, dealt with taxi-drivers, money changers, and went sightseeing with me until I got my bearings. In short, he was as chivalrous as any 15th century knight-errant. Then he went his way, and I was alone in this huge, dusty city on the edge of the desert.

Cairo, like an aging, voluptuous, belly dancer, may be a little careworn, but an air of mystery sensuously beckons from behind the veils. Cairo charms and enfolds in subtle, indefinable ways. Within one week I was considering staying on for awhile . . . maybe forever.

Finding my way about old Cairo (which is where tourists are most likely to be) was daunting. Most signs were written in Arabic; streets veered off at angles, ending in alleys and dead ends, and periodically pedestrians were forced to mingle among hair raising traffic to get around heaps of refuse, construction rubble, parked cars, donkeys and carts, and what-have-you.

Typically, as I edged through the streets with map in hand, someone – invariably a male, aged 8 to 80 – offered assistance. "Where are you going please? Do you need help?"

"Thank you, I was just looking for the . . . "

"Oh that place is," . . . so and thus from here, "you'll get lost. I'll take you."

"Very kind of you."

Then I would go along with my congenial guide and eventually reach my preferred destination in a round-about fashion via some establishment such as Mohammed's Perfumery or Ali's Curio Shop where, my guide insisted, I must, please, step in quickly and say hello. Please, it is Egyptian hospitality. These pleas were delivered as if life would be unbearable without my guide's friends having made my acquaintance. Refusing seemed out of the question. Once lured inside the shop I had then to get out without loading up on perfume or curios, which was not easy. Fortunately I had become practiced in the art of gentle refusal during eight months on the road.

One day I was tripping along Ramses Street bent on finding the Egyptian Museum, home of the famous, fabulous Tutankhamen treasures. My instinct that the place must be nearby was reinforced

when I spotted an imposing building looming two blocks ahead but on the opposite side of several lanes of heavy traffic. I dithered on the street corner, working up courage to stride like a local into the non-stop flow of bumpers and fenders, which was the only way to get across. Confidence to move finally came after I caught a sidelong glimpse of a man approaching. Oh no! Here comes another pesky perfume salesman, I thought. Hoping to escape his notice I plunged into the traffic.

As I made the careening dash into the fray of vehicles, I realized I was not alone. I felt a protective grip upon my elbow. The Egyptian had kept apace and now stepped right along with me, chivalrously holding up a halting hand for all the drivers to see as he escorted me across the street. On the opposite side, I nodded a curt thanks and hurried away.

"Wait!" he called.

"Don't want any perfume thanks," I waved him off and continued towards the building I hoped was the Egyptian Museum.

"No, please wait. Where are you from?"

"Canada," I called backwards.

"Canada! Oh Canada! I go to Canada in ten days. Oh wait, just one moment. Tell me about Canada," he shouted.

Something in his voice . . . I could not resist. I stopped, and he came to my side. A big man, well over six feet, he towered over me. I looked up into the handsome face of this tall, dark stranger, and said "Is that so, you are really going to Canada?" I *was* skeptical but at the same time, hearing the word "Canada" struck a chord of nostalgia, and I certainly didn't want to leave the man with the impression that Canadians are unfriendly.

"Yes it's true. I go just now to Hilton Hotel for long distance call. I have business in Canada. I have family. My cousin is married to Canadian. Yes!"

He moved closer.

"Won't you come and have tea in my shop and talk to me about Canada? Then, changing the subject abruptly, he said, "Your eyes," He looked at me appealingly. "Your eyes . . . remind me. . ."

(My eyes? This was intriguing, but probably just some foolish nonsense, I thought.) "Uh, no. I really must go. I cannot buy anything from your shop. I must travel light and have no room for souvenirs.

I'm sorry. I'm sure you have a beautiful shop, but I have no money. Honestly. I'm going to the museum. I don't have time, really I don't."

"But the museum is closed until two," he argued. "It is true. Come with me to Hilton then, not my shop." He smiled, a disarming smile with just a hint of roguishness in the curve of his lips. Then looking deep into my eyes with his own liquid brown ones he said, "You have the eyes of Nadia. The first one. This is dangerous for me."

A pained expression crossed his face. "Please. Egyptian hospitality. No selling. Just come and talk. Come. Please, we have tea and talk about Canada."

Did you imagine, dear reader, that I would fall for this line? I, the worldly, experienced, savvy traveler? You are right, I did. I simply had to hear more about Nadia's eyes.

I followed Mohamed expecting to go, as he had proposed, to the Hilton Hotel wherever that was. He finessed the way back across Ramses Street. I followed and soon we stepped over the threshold of, not the Hilton Hotel, no, no, here we were at Mohamed's curio shop. "I must stop here a moment. Would you like tea or coffee while you wait?" he said, and I noticed a mischievous flickering about the corner of his mouth.

"Coffee," I replied with an exasperated snicker and sat in the chair that was offered. Instead of coffee, a cup of sweet mint tea quickly appeared, which I accepted with a wry sigh. What was the use of getting annoyed. After all, I reasoned, I had an hour to kill before the museum opened at 2pm. The shop was cool and well stocked with lovely papyrus hangings, silver jewelry, mother-of-pearl inlaid boxes, and alabaster carvings.

We never did go to the Hilton Hotel. However, Mohamed talked and talked, and I listened, fascinated, to his rich baritone voice and endearing accent. He talked about his large family. "My family, we are Bedouins," he explained. "My grandfather, he come from the desert. He start the business at the museum. He was guide at the museum, the best. Now it is big business. All the family work in the business. We have our own garden for perfume."

Mohamed talked about his dreams. "This is family shop. I run the shop with some cousins. But I am building my own shop. There is so much to do. I am so busy with the builders. So many details, my head is big, like the pyramids, but I must do it for myself you understand."

"I wish to have nice business. Not too much. Just comfortable. I wish to marry, but no one come since my Nadia. Oh, I have many friends, but no one like Nadia. Nadia, my love."

With wistful, faraway eyes, Mohamed told me about Nadia. As a youngster, Mohamed said, he had been betrothed, in the Muslim custom, to someone else, but the pair felt no desire for one another, and their families, being progressive, had let the arrangement lapse. In the meantime, Mohamed had met and fallen in love with Nadia. They were to marry, he said, but before that happy day arrived tragedy struck. Nadia was killed in a traffic accident one month before the wedding.

Seven years had passed, said Mohamed, yet he could not get over Nadia. The thought of her was always with him.

"You have Nadia's eyes," he said once again.

A quiver passed down my spine. It was a charming story, but now it was time for a reality check. Getting my wits together, I glanced at my watch and told him I'd enjoyed the chat but as it was two o'clock I had better get on my way.

Mohamed walked me to the museum, and during that time I promised to meet him again at 6pm. As we parted he said, "Allah has brought you to me. You cannot leave me now."

I saw Mohamed that evening, and the next several evenings. He seemed to take it for granted that I would stay around Cairo indefinitely, and I hardly knew anymore what I would do. I had mixed feelings.

I noticed with minor reservations that our conversations took an inevitable commercial turn. Mohamed said he had made a wonderful deal. He had purchased, exceedingly cheap, some exceptional papyrus hangings. Now if someone were smart, said Mohamed, here was a possible fortune in the making. In North America papyrus hangings sell like "hot cakes," he said. A smart person could make easy money by buying and reselling them in Canada or America. I tended to agree but stuck to my reserve for the time being.

Other than this lurking, unspoken feeling that my friend may have some ulterior commercial motive, my mind more or less gave way to the tantalizing possibilities of romance in bloom.

One pleasantly mild evening Mohamed and I watched the light show over the Pyramids from the balcony of his family home in Giza. The trio of ancient temples stood stolidly anchored in desert foundations and traditions while modern technology radiated dancing beams about their facades. I was reminded of careless children cavorting under the patient but wary eyes of their elders. I too felt giddy and girlish. Culturally, religiously, socially and geographically, I was in a setting far removed from my natural place by the cool green mountains and ocean shores of British Columbia. Here I

was in Egypt, and I felt like I was falling in love. The feeling was strange, thrilling and quite disconcerting.

While we stood arm and arm watching the light show, Mohamed pointed to a heap of bricks in a small lot next door. Those, he said, were the beginnings of a shop of his own. "By October it will be finished. We will have it going and for Christmas we will have holiday at Sinai. I will show you everything. You will like it. You will be big help to me."

By now the idea of tending shop alongside Mohamed held its attractions, and the notion of spending the rest of my life in Cairo no longer seemed impossible. I pictured myself busy about my little shop, selling papyrus hangings to the tourists at Giza.

"I am happy here," said Mohamed, "but I am truly a Bedouin. I love the desert best. I love best to take my horse to the desert and stay in tent. When my head gets big like pyramid, I go to the desert with my horse."

"Oh yes Mohamed! Let's do it! Let's ride off to the desert."

The next day Mohamed's head was "big like pyramid." So many problems, builders and bricks and banks. Maybe Mohamed went to the desert, but I wasn't invited, which meant I had time for a little solitary thinking. I believed he was sincere, and I didn't believe him. I trusted him and didn't trust him. I wanted him and didn't want him. At times I felt an angel was directing my affairs; at times I thought it was the devil. It was good I had some time to myself, and besides I had errands of my own to attend to, the first being to arrange the mailing of letters home.

By this time I was slipping in and out of the traffic streams with almost as much aplomb as Cairenes, and I easily located a post office, a huge, crumbling building that resembled an ancient Foreign Legion garrison fallen into disrepair.

The signs in the post office were in Arabic, and the clerk spoke no English, so I simply thrust my letters forward and hoped for the best. This action produced a commotion in the lineup, which I did not understand, but I supposed something more was expected on my part. What, I could not guess, so I just stood there looking helpless. A clean-cut young man dressed in western fashion stepped forward and instructed me, in English, on the sum to be paid. Then he took the letters, stamped them and showed me where to drop them.

He said his name was Mohamed. That I should meet a second acquaintance named Mohamed struck me as only mildly curious because it is a very common name in Egypt. He said he was due at a

karate lesson at 4:30pm, but he was at my service until then. Had I seen such and such museum, he asked? Would I like some tea?

It was mid-afternoon, a tea garden was handy; I agreed tea would be nice.

As we walked along together, I noticed that Mohamed Two (as I think of him) held in his hand a greeting card picturing a garland of roses. The card was for his girlfriend, he said, explaining that there had been some misunderstanding between them, and he hoped the card would make amends. I assured him she would be touched. What is her name, I asked?

"Nadia," he said.

Nadia! I did not know if Nadia is as common a name in Egypt as is Mohamed, but hearing him say the name made my heart lurch as if I'd just received shocking news. Mohamed Two went on to say that now he had met me, he wasn't so sure about his feelings for Nadia. Suddenly he didn't care either for his karate lesson. He thought he would like to stay with me. He was sure he loved me, and he thought it would be great to come live in Canada.

"Allah is good," he said. "Allah has brought you to me."

Perhaps I overreacted. Maybe it *was* mere coincidence to meet two romantically linked Mohammed's and Nadia's within my brief ten-day stay in Cairo. I didn't know for sure about that, but I was sure in my heart that true love is not so easily acquired as recent heady events would have me believe.

Allah may well have had a hand in these proceedings. In my mind alarm bells began ringing and a very large inward voice said: Get thee gone!

In short, I said my good-byes and within a few days, I resumed my vagabond life and flew away to Athens. But Mohamed of Giza lingered on in my mind. I had his address. He had mine. When I reached Vancouver six weeks later, I could not help hoping for news of Mohamed. There was none.

I chided myself as a silly thing. Cynically, I told myself that some guys will do anything to sell a papyrus hanging. Later, I learned to laugh at myself and my Egyptian folly, and I decided I had no regrets for following my instincts, neither for allowing myself the experience in the first place nor for getting out when the vibes felt wrong. Instinct, I reaffirmed to myself, is a solo traveler's best companion.

Three months went by, and by that time Mohamed was relegated to a tender place in my memory. Then one day I received a card from Egypt, just a few words, but the sentiments stretched over thousands of miles to thrum once more upon my heartstrings.

He said he was waiting for me. He will wait forever, he said.

See Going Solo Tips

Social Issues, Words for Women

Safety Tips

Emergency

Down and Up in Paris

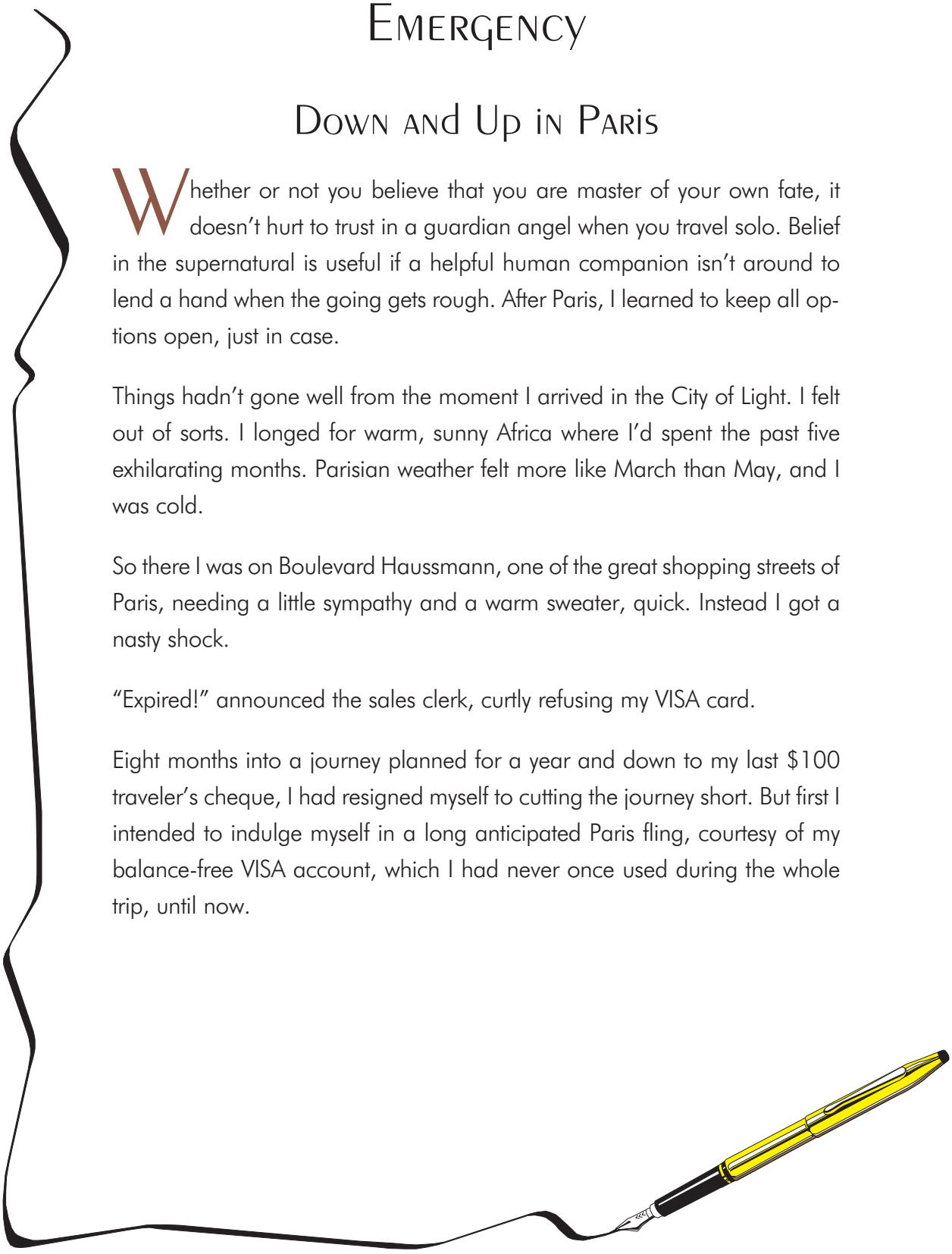
Whether or not you believe that you are master of your own fate, it doesn't hurt to trust in a guardian angel when you travel solo. Belief in the supernatural is useful if a helpful human companion isn't around to lend a hand when the going gets rough. After Paris, I learned to keep all options open, just in case.

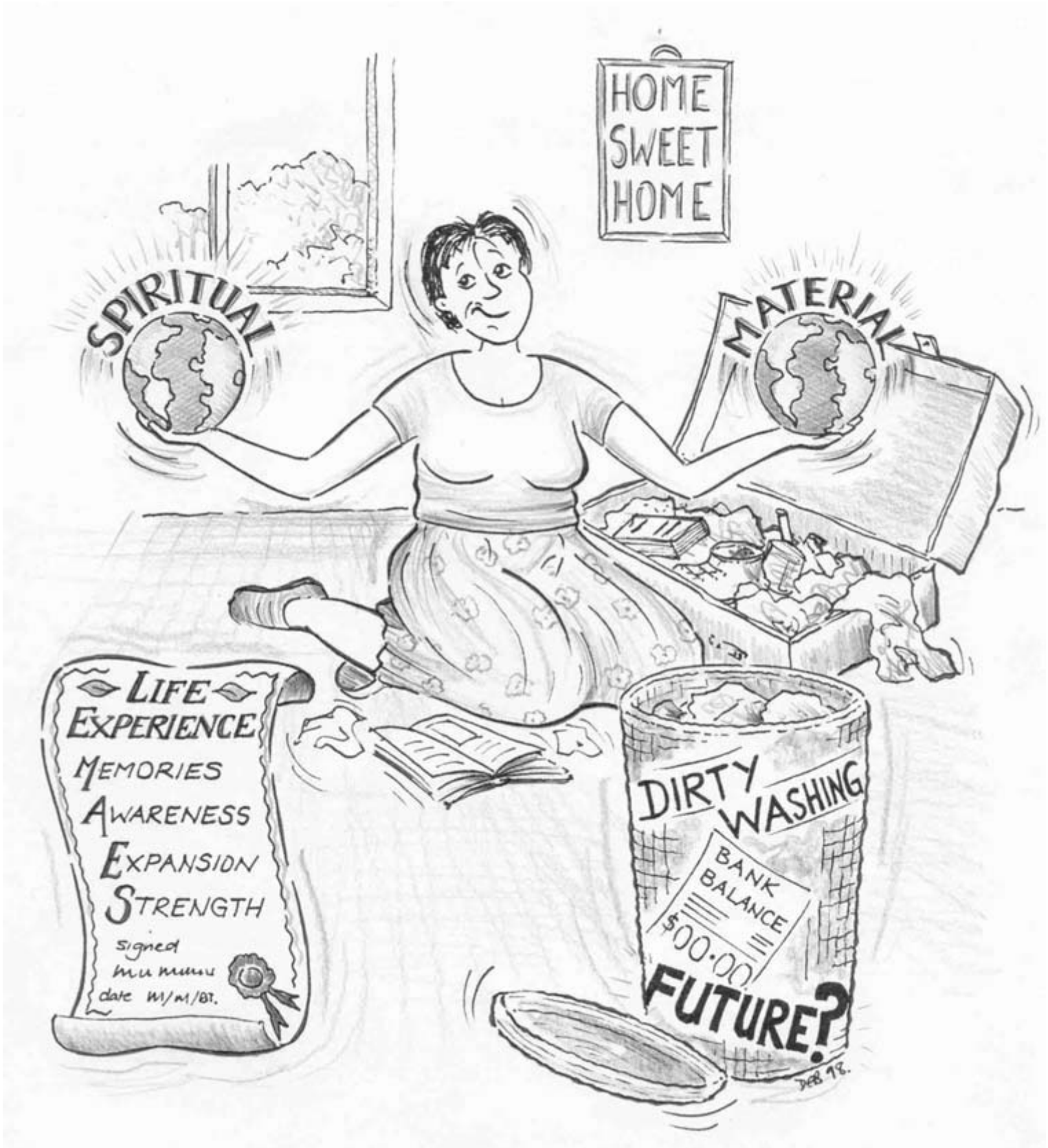
Things hadn't gone well from the moment I arrived in the City of Light. I felt out of sorts. I longed for warm, sunny Africa where I'd spent the past five exhilarating months. Parisian weather felt more like March than May, and I was cold.

So there I was on Boulevard Haussmann, one of the great shopping streets of Paris, needing a little sympathy and a warm sweater, quick. Instead I got a nasty shock.

"Expired!" announced the sales clerk, curtly refusing my VISA card.

Eight months into a journey planned for a year and down to my last $100 traveler's cheque, I had resigned myself to cutting the journey short. But first I intended to indulge myself in a long anticipated Paris fling, courtesy of my balance-free VISA account, which I had never once used during the whole trip, until now.

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To have this woman tell me the card was useless was more than just an embarrassing incident. Never mind the sweater. Never mind an evening at the opera, or clubbing at Moulin Rouge. I hadn't even money enough to pay my hotel bill.

Realizing the depth of my predicament caused a sickening lurch in my stomach. I snatched the card back from the clerk and glared at it in disbelief.

How could this be? I had certainly checked the dates before leaving Canada and had definitely made a point of ordering a new, updated card. I couldn't believe it, but no doubt about it, the card's validity date clearly said that it had expired three months earlier. Plan as you will, you can't always reckon with tricks of fortune.

I left the store empty-handed and trudged the streets shivering while I gradually pieced together prior events that had conspired to put me in this unpleasant quandary. I recalled the wallet-snatching incident seven months earlier in Darwin, Australia. At the time, I had been badly shaken to be robbed but counted myself lucky to have lost only my pride, a little spare cash, my driver's license, and my VISA card, which I promptly canceled.

Fortunately, with the help of family at home, the card had been replaced, and the new one was delivered to me in Australia by a friend who happened to be passing that way. It took two weeks to catch up with her, but we finally crossed paths in Sydney only two hours before I caught a bus for Adelaide. I was so thankful to see her and the new VISA card, I quickly tucked it away for safekeeping without even checking the dates. And tucked away it remained, untouched, unnoticed and unused until that blustery, rainy day in Paris seven months later. Normally a new card is good for at least two years; it never occurred to me to think otherwise.

Normal, however, is no acquaintance of destiny. Alone, down and out in Paris, I received no help, as I normally should have done (so they told me later), from banks bearing the VISA logo. Clerks and officials seemed indifferent to my plight. An expired card is a useless card. Neither a replacement card nor emergency funds were possible while abroad. A transfer of funds from my home bank could be arranged, but only after the three-day holiday weekend, which was just about to begin. Sorry, bank closed.

As these were the days before ATM's (automated teller machines) were in use, a transfer of money by wire was the only solution. Five months earlier, in Johannesburg, South Africa, I had arranged to withdraw from my bank account, all but $500, which was reserved as my welcome-home kitty. I prayed that meager sum was still intact and that transfer fees and long distance telephone charges would not gobble the dollars up before I got my needy hands on them.

Meanwhile, until banking hours and time differences aligned on my side, I had to survive three anxious, practically penniless days not loving Paris at all.

Imagine being in Paris and agonizing over whether to spend a few francs visiting the Louvre or eating lunch along Champs-Élysées – at McDonald's.

Friday and Saturday passed gloomily. Sunday morning, having read that admission is free on Sundays, I set out by Metro subway for the Pompidou Center (*Center Culturel Georges Pompidou*) a popular spot housing a library, modern art museum, galleries, theaters and restaurants. My gray mood conformed well enough to the drizzle-laden, overcast sky as I approached the complex from a dingy side-street. I first set eyes on a collection of modern outdoor sculptures: huge red lips, writhing green snakes, and multicolored plastic whirligigs spouting water in a fountain. The building itself looked as if it had its insides out. A garish monstrosity of glass, metal tubing and duct work painted in primary colors, the whole scene struck me as tawdry, not at all the gracious classical architecture I'd expected in Paris.

Yet, curiously, the place attracted throngs of visitors. The library was so popular a long queue waited for entrance, and inside, people reading books lolled all over the place. Everyone looked relaxed and comfortable. From a top floor lookout, I could see, spreading in all directions, the spires and domes of the splendid, monumental Paris I had come to see. And in the plaza below, I saw that crowds were gathering around street entertainers, mimes, jugglers, and musicians. Laughter and applause rose in the atmosphere. I began to see that this was a Paris of fun and fancy, free from the formal restraints demanded by its more sophisticated elements.

Upon that realization, I looked up and caught a shaft of sunshine breaking through the clouds, and instantly, the pall of gloom I had worn like a shroud for days fell away. I felt good again, and I was glad to be Paris, even if I was broke. Leaving behind my woes, I hurried down to join the cheerful crowd outdoors.

With a new, improved disposition, it wasn't long before Paris worked magic over me. I wandered the streets munching a *crudité* (submarine sandwich French style). I laughed at the antics of street clowns, hummed along with singers and musicians. I window-shopped. I watched children playing in the amusement park at Forum des Halles and arrived at the famous Notre Dame Cathedral just in time to catch a free concert. I rambled and marveled to discover that you can have a grand time in Paris for free, or almost free.

On Tuesday, I finally got through to my bank and fidgeted nervously while the clerk checked my records. At last a friendly voice came on the line and said, "You have $l,500 in your account, Ms Redfern. How much shall we send?"

Fifteen hundred dollars. Surprise!

Well now, the plot thickened. While I was greatly relieved to know that I could pay my hotel bill without resorting to begging on the streets, I wondered, where the heck had the money come from? If I had arranged, five months earlier in Johannesburg, the transfer of all but $500 from my bank account, how come I still had $1,500?

It was a mystery. I remembered having been annoyed at the time, in Johannesburg, that my own miscalculations had led me to expect more money than I actually received, but I figured banks are never wrong, and I would simply have to be more frugal than planned. My plan had been to linger in South Africa or Kenya at some peaceful, inexpensive seaside location and work on some writing ideas. Instead, dwindling funds kept me moving; the perfect haven never materialized, and now, unexpectedly, here I was in Paris with time and money at my disposal.

Once again I contemplated a spending spree, but something told me it was time to get my finances and my life back on track. That meant going home and asking some questions.

Why had VISA issued a virtually useless card? VISA officials could not explain, except to say it should not have happened. Why had I received no help in Paris? Again, that should not have happened.

Why hadn't my bank sent the money to me in Africa when I asked for it? Well apparently bank errors do occur. In this case a transaction I initiated, not in Africa but earlier on in Australia, had shorted my account by $1,000. The mistake had been corrected two days after the South African transfer of funds was completed, by which time I was on the road again, none the wiser.

Coincidence? Destiny? Divine intervention? Who can say? But of all my travel tales, I love most to retell how a seemingly negative chain of events brought me to the exact place I needed to be to fulfill my wishes. As luck, or fate would have it, I arrived back home in Vancouver just in time to snap up a rental unit high on a hillside overlooking the sea, at exactly the price I could afford. It was the perfectly peaceful spot I had looked for but never found in Africa. With a few extra dollars in my account and three months to spare before my leave of absence expired, I had time, and the means to launch the writing career I had been dreaming about.

When I decided to devote a year of my middle life to traveling, I hoped the experience would amount to more than a mere extended vacation. I hoped that expanding my horizons would lead to a wiser and stronger me. I hoped for a real change of life. In fact my solo journey of discovery led me full circle back to the same old place to face the same old challenges. My ingrained fears, prejudices and inhibitions did not vanish because I went abroad. But by going abroad I gained a heightened sense of achievement and a new perspective on living. As for changing my life, I now realize that is a journey in progress.

See Going Solo Tips

Money Tips

— begin again —